

Fox Two!

by Tiger Tank

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Summary: Another one of my lousy, experimental oneshots. This will probably be a bit longer than Fox One. Rated M for violence and vulgar language. Basically, this revolves around a band of survivors who try to make their way to safety...

1. Monkeying about

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things you may want to ask or comment upon. Read that before you waste my time with questions that I've already answered. Even if you don't like the fic, I suggest you read the notes before you start flaming me for some reason or another.

Thank you.

Tiger Tank (AKA: RedGuard6)

Working Title: Fox Two

UNSC Colony "Bountiful."

Somewhere in the capitol city "Prosperity."

0032 hours, local time. Late October, 2552 CE

A dozen, battered survivors marched through the dark, deserted streets of prosperity, with only the glow of fires, Wraith mortars, and Bountiful's two moons to light the way. Palls of ink-black smoke billowed into the air, partly obscuring the moons and the stars. Abandoned and overturned vehicles - ranging from sports-utility vehicles and convertibles, to burned-out hulks of Covenant hover tanks - lay scattered around the streets like broken and discarded toys. The ubiquitous stench of death and destruction hung in the air like a foul mist, and numerous corpses - human and alien - lay strewn about the pavement, which was flecked with dried blood spatters and arterial sprays. Many of the bloated and maimed corpses were human civilians, with a smattering of planetary defense force uniforms - otherwise known as the local militia - here and there. There were also the bodies of the various alien races comprising the Covenant. None in the party reacted visibly to the grisly sight, all of them having gotten over the shocks to their sensibilities hours ago.

The distant sounds of battle could be heard as countless, chaotic skirmishes raged throughout the city: the distinct whine of plasma weapons and the barking staccato of human firearms was punctuated with the thunder of explosive ordnance. Otherwise, all was quiet around the ragged band as they trudged onward toward perceived safety.

Officer Sarah Caston of the Prosperity Police Department led the way, her department-issued Glock 19 automatic and a powerful, lit LED torch in hand. A pair of shadowy, armed individuals followed close behind - one with a rifle, the other with a shotgun. Sarah was clad in a dark-blue uniform, consisting of slacks and a long-sleeved, collared shirt, and was an athletic woman of average stature, with piercing, steel-grey eyes. Caston's shoulder-length, dirty-blond hair was up in a messy bun, with several stray strands touching the collar of her navy-blue jacket. A black leather duty belt cinched her waist, with various pouches and holsters secured to it.

Caston was also very tired. She'd been running all over the city, for the better part of the previous morning, responding to various calls made by the "concerned" citizenry. Burglaries, various public and domestic disturbances - including subduing an irate and foul-mouthed drunk - and now, she had to deal with what initially appeared to be an alien invasion. The blonde officer found herself stopping to think. No, that doesn't sound right. Sarah couldn't put her finger on it, but that description didn't quite seem to fit; she

recalled that she had seen the aliens fighting amongst each other as often as she had seen them killing off humans. _That's really bizarre_, Caston thought to herself. _I thought they were all hell-bent on killing humanity off. Why would they turn on each other like that?_

"Ma'am?"

Sarah nearly jumped five feet into the air - she would have, if she wasn't so tired. Even though that single word was barely above a whisper, she reacted as though someone had yelled it into a bullhorn two feet behind her; she'd nearly dropped both her torch and her handgun. The blonde furiously whirled around to face the person who'd disturbed her thoughts and hissed, "_what?_"

The spectacled rifleman was roughly a head taller than Caston, in spite of his seemingly hunched-over appearance. Crowning his head was a camouflage-patterned boonie hat, which partially obscured his countenance in shadow. Despite their difference in height, the man seemed to recoil at the venomous glare she cast at him. "Sorry, ma'am," he continued in that low and hushed voice, "you'd stopped an' were spacin' out." Caston blinked blearily for a second before shaking her head, as if to clear it. "Sorry," she muttered. "It's been a long day, for me..."

"Yes, ma'am," the young man nodded as he shifted the sleek, scoped, bolt-action, hunting rifle that he carried in his gloved hands. In spite of the bolt action, the rifle's appearance strongly reminded Sarah of the old black-powder muskets and rifles used almost a thousand years ago. However, Caston couldn't readily identify the weapon, especially in the darkness.

Firearms weren't exactly illegal on Bountiful - it was like any other colony world in the UNSC. Many government-issued weapons, as well as ammunition used by military and police, were strictly controlled and were illegal for civilians to even possess. This included any and all eight-gauge shotguns. Strict limits on the carrying capacity of a firearm were also put into place - many thirty- and twenty-round magazines were often illegal for non-sworn citizens to own, let alone use.

However, this still allowed people to own a motley assortment of "obsolete" and "antiquated" weapons - which were often far deadlier than the modern, standard-issue. Caston had always scoffed at this glaring loophole in the system - but now, she was glad for it. It meant that the citizenry was still armed, and wasn't completely defenseless. In fact, in terms of small arms, they were better-equipped to take down Covenant.

"Ma'am?" the trench-coated fellow queried, noticing the look of concentration etched into her elegant features. "Ah--"

"Hey!" one of the unarmed civilians cut in, to the irritation of the rest of the group. Some of the other members in the group tried to shush him. "What's the hold-up? Let's keep moving!" Caston scowled and gave the loudmouth a rude gesture of disapproval, before turning around and continuing down the street. The trench-coated rifleman and the shotgunner both followed a few paces behind her, bemused, while the loudmouthed kid grumbled inaudibly under his breath.

"Fuckin' bitch," the blond teenager muttered, returning Caston's rude gesture and directing it to her back.

"Well, Adam, it doesn't help that you're an asshole..."

"Fuck off, fatso," Adam snapped at the civilian that had addressed him. The stocky, twenty-something man, clad in a security guard's uniform with a photo-identification card that read "LANGDON, S.", looked ready to give a sharp retort. However, he was stopped by a feminine hand landing on his broad shoulder. "Shaun, _don't_," a slender, shorter Asian teenager warned him, sternly. Langdon frowned down at her, but his friend pressed, "_let it go_." The portly guard reluctantly obeyed and remained silent, glowering at the blond teenager. Adam sneered at him, earning a smoldering glare from Langdon's female friend.

"And _you_, Adam," she stated quietly, "do everybody a favor and shut up. You wanna get us all killed?" Adam shrugged and replied, his tone dismissive, "whatever, Em." Em's glare intensified, and for a moment she looked torn between giving the blond teenager a piece of her mind, and letting that one slide.

"Keep it down, you three," one of the armed members of the group grunted. He was a taller, older, broad-shouldered man, dressed in the camouflage-patterned livery of the Bountiful Planetary Defense Forces. A subdued, lightly-colored bar on his uniform collar denoted him as a second lieutenant, and a similarly subdued nametag read: "VELASQUEZ, H." The trooper carried an MA5K RIS assault carbine - an MA5K modified to accept rail-mounted accessories, with a torch secured by a scope ring mount to a rail mounted on the right side of the weapon. The arguing trio eyed the carbine warily, and wisely chose to cease their bickering for the moment.

"That's better," the lieutenant muttered. "Kids these days..." One of the other armed members of the group snorted at his remark.

A brilliant beam of lavender light suddenly lanced out from an office building, up ahead, and pierced through Velasquez's skull. The lieutenant's eyes rolled up into his head as he toppled over, dead, onto the pavement with an audible _whump!_ A rather large hole was neatly burned into his forehead.

"_Sniper!_"

"Cover! Cover!_"

Up ahead, the three armed scouts scrambled for whatever cover or concealment they could find on either side of the street.

Adam, Emma, and the other three unarmed civilians stared at Velasquez's cooling body in abject horror. Langdon, however, scooped up the dead trooper's MA5K and grabbed Emma's arm. "Emma, c'mon! Take cover!" He'd just started dragging her away when one of the other civilians was hit in the chest. It was at this point that the other two armed survivors ran for cover, while the red-haired, thirty-something woman screamed in agony as she sank to the ground, clutching at the sizzling wound. That was enough to make the other survivor pick up a screaming child, a little girl, and bolt.

"Mommy! _Mommy!_" the girl wailed, nearing hysterics. "No! Wait!

Don't leave Mommy! No!" The man carrying the child, presumably the father, ignored the child's pleas and sprinted into a ruined diner across the street. Adam, however, remained rooted to the spot by terror. He stared at the downed red-head and saw the fear in her eyes. The blond teenager suddenly felt a white-hot lance of pain stab through his left thigh, causing him to cry out in pain. "Oh fuck!"

Shaun and Emma watched Adam roll around and scream in agony from behind a wrecked Wraith mortar tank. Langdon harshly suppressed a sickening feeling of satisfaction at the brash teen's predicament. I've got bigger fish to fry. The stocky security guard began visualizing the attack in his mind. "Where the hell did that come from?" one of the armed survivors, a man, bellowed. "Anybody see?"

"Further up the street, I think!" Caston hollered back. "Stay down!"

"I am!"

"Not you!" Puzzled and curious, Shaun looked around and spotted the other unarmed man - who had hidden in the diner - cautiously making his way over to the wounded. At least he's got the sense to stay behind cover, Shaun noted. "You there! Stop! Stop moving!" Caston yelled. "Stay where you are!"

The brown-haired man seemingly ignored her and did not heed her words until a bullet hit the ground next to his hand, accompanied by the loud **bam!** of a pistol firing. The brunet immediately froze with an expression of shock on his face. Langdon suddenly heard Caston screaming her head off, even over Adam's agonised cries. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" she bellowed, "you could have hit him, you fucking idiot! Hey! Where're you going! I'm not done with y--stop! Damn it!"

"What's going on?" one of the other armed survivors - a woman, judging by her higher-pitched voice, vocalized the question on Shaun's mind.

"Damn it! That stupid ass ditched us!"

"Who?"

"Trench-Coat Guy! Mister Funny-Hat! Hell, I don't know his fucking name, and I don't give a shit!"

Langdon inwardly shook his head. It wasn't rare for people to do crazy things like running off on their own. He knew it was usually because they would panic and lose their heads. A beam glanced off the armor of the Wraith he and Emma were hiding behind, causing them both to flinch.

Adam's incoherent screaming began to die down, becoming groans of pain. Shaun risked a look and saw that the teenager was still clutching his leg. The red-headed woman had stopped moving, although she still appeared to be breathing - she gave silent, labored gasps of pain. The seconds slowly crawled by, and they all remained where they were for what felt like an eternity. Checking his wrist-chrono, Langdon noted that ten minutes had passed. The alien sniper had

wisely decided to stop firing, but Shaun had a feeling that it was watching them, waiting for them to move from behind their cover.

An eerie silence had returned, settling over the scattered survivors.

Unseen by the enemy sniper and by the pinned survivors, the trench-coated man lay in wait, fifty or sixty meters ahead, almost perfectly hidden and kneeling behind a set of stairs. He had unslung his black backpack and set it beside him. Through his rifle's scope, he silently watched an office building seventy meters away. He was sure he'd seen the sniper fire coming from one of the lower floors during the attack.

"Where are you, you frikkin' alien?" he muttered inaudibly, slowly shifting his aim to look through some of the shattered office windows. Finally, on the third floor, he saw an ugly, ravening creature whose ugly head resembled a vulture's. Its attention appeared to be directed at the survivors behind him - its eyes were behind the integrated scope of its own weapon.

He lined up the cross-hairs with the alien's head and slowed his breathing. You have all the time in the world, he reminded himself, trying to relax and concentrate. Of course, things are often more easily said than done - his sight picture wavered, betraying his nervousness and his animalistic fear of pain. Man, I'm really glad I bought these kneepads. The young man pushed those wandering thoughts aside and attempted to concentrate. Don't rush yourself. Relax. He nearly laughed at himself. It was almost impossible to stay calm. The young man's heart raced with the knowledge that a hostile was nearby - an enemy intent on killing him, his comrades-in-arms, and any other human beings it had a clear shot at. The situation, in spite of its horrifying reality, started to seem surreal to him, and a cool, detached feeling of calm draped over him like a cloak. He embraced this feeling and clung to it, finally calming down.

The young man took a slow, deep breath, then slowly released his breath. Halfway through his exhalation, he held his breath and pulled the trigger. There was a loud **boom!** and the rifle kicked into his shoulder. Hard. The trench-coated man grunted as he shifted the cross-hairs back onto the target: the Jackal was still standing. Something's wrong, here, he noted. A cold lump plummeted into his gut as realization struck him a second later.

I frikkin' missed

Fuck!" he hissed as he frantically worked the bolt, causing him to momentarily lose his sight picture. The ejected brass casing made a quiet, bell-like, pinging sound as it hit the sidewalk. When he reacquired his target, the vulture-headed alien had lowered its weapon and was looking around wildly for the source of the hostile gunfire.

Guess he hasn't spotted me, he thought. He instinctively adjusted his aim and loosed another shot. This time, purple blood fountained from the side of the alien's throat and the creature toppled over. He watched as two pulses of purple blood spurted into the air above the downed Jackal. After that, nothing.

After confirming that the Jackal was dead or suitably incapacitated, the young man ejected the spent cartridge and chambered a fresh round. He examined the surrounding area with his scope, searching for any more hostiles, or for any enemy spotters. Seeing none, he got to his feet and slipped his rucksack back on before making his way back to the rest of the survivors.

As he approached the car he'd left Caston behind, he quietly queried, "ma'am? Are you there?" The blonde officer peeked from behind the car and shot him a smoldering glare. "What the hell are you doing?" she snapped. "Where the fuck were you?" The young man paused for a brief second. Her choice of words had affronted him, but given his abrupt and as-of-yet unexplained actions, it was understandable. So, he merely shrugged and reported, "threat neutralized. One of those ugly vulture-heads, ma'am." He caught sight of the other survivors as they timidly began emerging from cover. The brown-haired man ran over to the wounded woman and the cussing teenager. Shortly thereafter, the brunet was joined by the child he'd carried to safety. The bulky security guard had slung the MA5K over his shoulder, and had begun the grisly task of scavenging ammunition and equipment from Velasquez's rapidly cooling corpse.

"Yeah, I heard the gunshots," Caston scowled as the trench-coated man returned his attention to her. "I've got a bone to pick with you, later, bub."

"Yes, ma'am." The blonde officer shook her head at him and walked away to check on the wounded. As she left him, he heard her mutter, "frikkin' toy soldier." The rifleman watched as one of the other armed survivors - a pretty brunette in a tube-top - was in the process of patching up the auburn-haired mother. Tube-top wore a black pistol belt with a tactical light clipped to it, along with a number of ammo pouches secured to the front and sides. A pair of automatic handguns rode in a shoulder holster and in a thigh holster. I wonder what kind of heat she's packing, he mused. His gaze then shifted upon the blond teenager - the lad's leg was already patched up and he was leaning on a large, black man for support.

The black man wore a PDF unit patch, but he looked more like a defense contractor or a mercenary than a member of the local defense forces. He wore a black, tactical vest over a white, collared, long-sleeved shirt. Over his dark slacks, he wore black, tactical kneepads, and the ensemble was completed with a pair of black, fingerless gloves. A holstered, large-framed automatic was secured to the left side of his vest - an FN Five-Seven, and he carried a Fabrique Nationale Herstal Project 90 submachinegun - the basis of the popular P90 carbine utilized by civilians for varmint-hunting and home defense. The ammunition it used was also used in the somewhat popular Five-Seven pistol, which was originally designed to be a sidearm for an operator using the P90. It was a logical choice for someone in the defense forces, the young rifleman noted. He was dimly aware that the shotgunner had begun conversing with Caston, as he mentally reviewed what he knew about the PDF trooper's hardware. He unwittingly began walking down the street, wandering away from the group while he lost himself in his thoughts.

The P90 was compact, had a magazine capacity of fifty rounds, and was chambered in a 5.7x28mm cartridge that was capable of penetrating anything short of the best (and very expensive) UNSC-issued body armor. It was boxy in appearance, and the majority of its body was

made of durable polymer. It was a little over a third of a meter in length, and its clear plastic magazine ran lengthwise along the top of the weapon. The civilian-legal P90 carbines had a lengthened barrel, compared to the P90 submachinegun - but it was still very compact and quite accurate. While nowhere nearly as popular or widely-distributed as certain Glock handguns or Remington-Mossberg's shotguns and rifles, the Five-Seven and the P90 were used by those who could afford it - and ammunition was about as plentiful as any other non-government-issue cartridges currently available.

For centuries, the P90 had served the UNSC government as the best personal defense weapon available for rear-echelon troops, and law-enforcement and government agencies. However, politics - as it often did - came into play and the P90 was rendered "obsolete" by the M7 caseless submachinegun. This even more compact weapon took on the P90s role as the prime PDW used by UNSC forces - in spite of the fact that the P90 had a much longer effective range and had comparatively superior stopping power and penetration capabilities. Still, the retirement of the P90 meant that it was available to civilians, and it was embraced by people out in the outer territories - especially the local militia. Numerous surplus P90s and massive amounts of stockpiled ammunition were sold to local law-enforcement agencies and planetary defense troops - and there was an enormous amount of parts for the weapons, readily available on the open market, which facilitated parts replacement and unit repairs.

Naturally, while the P90 reigned supreme, the Five-Seven had served as the standard-issue sidearm. When the P90 and the 5.7x28mm cartridge were retired from service, the Five-Seven followed suit. Handguns were, naturally, more strictly controlled than rifles or submachineguns since they were easier to conceal. Thus, only militia and law-enforcement officers were allowed to own or carry handguns with a magazine capacity over ten rounds - and they were almost always carried out in the open, riding in a readily visible - and, unfortunately, easily accessible - holster. While the somewhat rag-tag Planetary Defense Forces could use any weapons they could pick up and find supplies for, law-enforcement officers like Caston were considerably less fortunate. Police departments often prohibited officers from carrying personal weapons while officially on-duty - they would always be stuck carrying an anemic, 9x19mm variant of the Glock. At least, that was the case with the Prosperity Police Department.

The spectacled man suddenly found himself before a relatively intact retail storefront that apparently sold sporting goods and camping equipment. Hello, what have we here? He strode forward, into the store, and found himself grinning at the smorgasbord of goods inside.

Excellent.

To be continued...?

Author's Notes: Get used to the cliff-hanger "endings." Muahahaha! That was basically the only way I felt I could divide this one-shot up. Then again...perhaps my understanding of the concept of a one-shot is flawed. Hmm...

I apologize that I left out some details, again...same as Fox One. Although I really wonder if I can get this story off the ground. I

have a basic overall plot down, but I want to throw in some subplots to give it a little more depth. So it's now a matter of how I'm going to get from the beginning to the end - as opposed to "where the futch am I going?"

As you may have noticed, I've made up firearms companies and I've even combined current, existing ones. I'm sure some of you are wondering "what gives? What is up with that?" Well, I'm surprised nobody's really questioned Bungie on just who is manufacturing weapons and equipment for the UNSC military. I don't think they've gone that far into detail - the lack of realism with the human firearms is evidence enough. C'mon, seriously. Sixty rounds of 7.62x51mm into the MA5B's impossible compact magazine? I think not. At least the M7 is more believable...the magazine is similar to the FN P90s, in that the magazine is mounted parallel to the weapon, rather than perpendicular (as with more conventional rifle/weapon designs).

Anyway, I figure that a lot of the companies/corporations today probably might not exist in the far future. Or, in order to survive, they would combine with other companies. Or they would be bought by other companies and renamed. Blah-de-blah.

Also, yes. I did change things around a bit. Considerably. Remember, I did say that the story was a work in process. These one-shots let me play around and help me figure out what I may or may not want to use in the story. If I ever manage to slap it together. If I'm not satisfied with something, I'll be very hesitant to post it...

2. Hide and seek

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amusing and depressing. Anyway, yeah. Enjoy the fic. Also, please be sure to read the author's notes at the end. It may address some things you may want to ask or comment upon. Read that before you waste my time with questions that I've already answered. Even if you don't like the fic, I suggest you read the notes before you start flaming me for some reason or another.

Thank you.

Tiger Tank (AKA: RedGuard6)

Working Title: Fox Two

UNSC Colony "Bountiful."

Somewhere in the capitol city "Prosperity."

0116 hours, local time. Late October, 2552 CE

Jill Gilliam gave a sigh of relief, finishing up on the wounded, older, auburn-haired woman. In spite of the grievous wound inflicted by the beam weapon she'd been hit with, the older woman would be fine - provided she got some rest. Jill smiled wanly as the woman's daughter, Amy, clung to her mother and cried. Gilliam was an attractive, twenty-something brunette, clad in a blue tube-top, a short, black mini-skirt, and a pair of high, black leather boots. A black, webbed, pistol belt - with various pouches secured to it - hugged her hips. She carried a pair of holstered M1911 automatics: one in a leather shoulder rig, and the other in a tactical rig secured to her thigh. Although she didn't look like it, Jill was extremely proficient with her pistols - she had to be, since it was one of the reasons she had been able to join the Defense Forces. She was also certified to administer first aid - which had more than once proved to be very convenient and useful.

Just like it did now.

"You're going to be fine, ma'am," Jill assured the red-head. "You'll just have to take it easy for awhile."

"Thank you," the older woman whispered weakly. The brown-haired man, apparently an acquaintance or a friend, echoed the red-head's thanks to Jill. The brunette smiled at them, and little Amy, before getting up and walking over to the *de facto* leader of the group: her superior and friend, William E. Peyton. Peyton, unlike many of the other horny, sexist men in the defense forces, had accepted Gilliam for her exceptional skills set - and he had been the other reason Jill had been able to enlist. Gilliam had failed to meet the physical and educational requirements of the UNSC Marine Corps, and the UNSC Navy, and was unable to enlist for other reasons (she didn't have a penis, and she wasn't willing to sleep with people for a promotion). That suited her just fine: she hated space travel, anyway.

The big black man was currently in the middle of a heated discussion with some of the other members of the group. He commanded a presence to be respected, Jill knew he cared about the people he was responsible for, and he didn't take any shit. Plus, he was intimidating as hell. She stood back and watched, listening in on the debate.

"With all due respect, we have to find cover. The sun's going to rise in several hours," the dark-haired shotgunner insisted. He was a man of average height, clad in dark slacks and a dark sports jacket.

"No, we have to keep moving," the portly security guard shook his head in disagreement. "If we don't make it to the space port, we're as good as dead."

"We'll be dead if the Covenant catch us in the open." The short Asian woman beside him pointed out. Langdon scratched the back of his head and fell silent.

"The Space Port is our only means of getting off this rock, alive, or even communicating with people off-world!" Caston pressed, "we'll all die here if we don't--!"

"What good is a spaceship gonna do us if nobody knows how to fly the damned thing? And what good is a distress call gonna do us? I bet the UNSC has already written this entire colony off as a loss!" the shotgunner retorted.

"All Planetary Defense Forces will have rallied to Prosperity Space Port and are probably securing it against the Covenant," Peyton interjected; his basso voice and his presence succeeded in shutting everyone up. "That's the standard operating procedure in the event that the Covenant come calling. So, we really do need to get to the Space Port - that way, we'll at least be in the company of the surviving members of the local garrison. And believe you me, they'll be itchin' to gun down some o' those frikkin' aliens and get some payback." The spectacled shotgunner looked ready to protest. "Failing that, we all 'requisition' some transports and get the hell off the planet.

"But," the burly PDF trooper pointed out, "we have to keep first things first. Right now, we have wounded and I think we can all agree that we need to get some rest. We have to take things one step at a time, so we'll worry about the other stuff when we come to it. The million-dollar question now, is: 'where are we gonna hole up?'" Everyone in the loose "huddle" fell silent and pondered his words. More than ever before, Jill admired Peyton's reasoning and his ability to even think under such harrowing conditions. Still, something about this whole mess didn't make sense - Gilliam just couldn't put her finger on it. So, she pushed those extraneous thoughts aside and began looking around for any street signs or landmarks, in an attempt to find her bearings.

"Pard'n me, but what're you all standin' around here, for?"

It was "Mister Funny-Hat," as Caston had referred to him. Briefly, Jill smirked at the nickname bestowed upon the trench-coated rifleman - Caston glowered at him, however, eyeing him with suspicion. Admittedly, the tiger-stripe-camo boonie was a rather unusual piece of headwear - but, Jill supposed he had his reasons for wearing it. His rifle rested on his right shoulder, and he had an unreadable grin on his face. His eyes were still obscured in shadow, but she could tell he wore glasses.

"What the fuck do you think, dipshit?" the blond teenager, Adam, snorted derisively. Funny-Hat's grin suddenly seemed forced; then, it

slowly vanished from his face, altogether. Peyton rumbled to the rambunctious teen, "cool it, kid," before addressing the trench-coated man. "We're trying to figure out where we can hole up for the day," he explained, "so we can rest and hide from the Covenant."

"Oh? Then I think I found us a hidey-hole, sir," Funny-Hat's grin returned. "There's a store, 'Larry's Sporting Goods,' not even a block away - we could hide in there for a day or two. There're things we'll definitely be needing, too: water, food, weapons, ammo,--" he trailed off. Peyton considered this for a moment and nodded. "All right."

"What about her?" that Asian girl queried, gesturing to the red-head Jill had treated. "Adam can still walk, but what do we do with her?"

"Nothing, for now," Peyton replied. He turned his head to look at Jill. "Gilliam. Go with Mister--" he paused and shot a look at Funny-Hat; the spectacled fellow caught the hint. "Dave Yamada, sir," the trench-coated man helpfully supplied. The black PDF trooper turned back to his subordinate.

"Jill, go with Mister Yamada and scope out the place. Then the two of you get back here and we'll decide on our next course of action. Watch each other's backs out there."

Jill nodded her assent and drew one of her handguns, while Funny-Hat-Yamada - inclined his head and affirmed, "yes, sir." Exchanging looks, the pair of them set out on the street.

Peyton watched them go and frowned. He didn't recognize Yamada, so it wasn't likely that the younger man was in the defense forces. However, his mannerisms and behavior seemed to indicate that he wasn't exactly a run-of-the-mill civilian. The big black man watched Yamada as he stalked away, keeping to whatever cover or concealment he could; although the trench-coated man's movements were somewhat clumsy and unrefined, it was a pretty safe bet that he knew what he was doing. That inexplicably bothered William E. Peyton.

As the pair disappeared around a street corner, the PDF trooper pushed those thoughts aside and mentally reviewed the situation. A little over twelve hours ago, a trio of ostensibly lost Covenant capital ships had exited Slipspace above the colony. For reasons unknown, the ships deployed Phantom gunships and Spirit dropships before self-destructing above the planet. Ever since they'd made planetfall, the Covies fought amongst each other, killing any humans that got in the crossfire. To make matters worse, the aliens had somehow managed to land heavily armored Wraith tanks, skittish Ghosts, and saucer-shaped Spectres on the ground.

The planetary defense forces had had very little time to react to the Covenant raining from the sky. Given the lack of human aircraft in the skies, it was pretty safe to assume that the half-dozen Skyhawk Short-Take-Off, Vertical Landing fighters had been..._neutralized...for lack of a better word. Either they had been shot out of the skies or they'd been blasted while still on the ground at the Spaceport.

He'd seen a number of wrecked Warthogs, already, along with the

bodies of their riders. Peyton had no idea how bad casualties were, and even beginning to ponder how many dead and wounded there could be made him sick to his stomach.

The only potentially good news was that Peyton hadn't seen any wrecks of the armored personnel carriers that were stationed at the space port. That meant they were still probably operational - and guarding the facility.

Prosperity's Planetary Defense Force garrison had four, M768 Light Armored Vehicles at its disposal; each LAV was an amphibious, eight-wheeled, armored personnel carrier equipped with a twenty-millimeter gun mounted in a low-profile, dorsal turret. Its design and appearance was inspired by and based upon the ancient Mowag Piranha family of light armored vehicles, which was widely used (and improved upon) for much of the late twentieth, the twenty-first, twenty-second, and twenty-third centuries. The M768 LAV could survive a direct hit from a single SPNKR missile or a rocket-propelled grenade, and could carry anywhere from four to six people in its passenger compartment. A pod containing a pair of guided missiles could also be mounted onto the turret, giving the LAV an extra, armor-piercing punch that could put the hurt on the Covenant Wraith tank. The M768 wasn't as heavily armed or armored as the M808B Scorpion tank, but it was faster, lighter, more maneuverable, and cheaper in more aspects than one.

Since the evacuation/defense strategy of the city centered on Prosperity Space Port, the LAVs were stored in steel-reinforced, permacrete bunkers along the Space Port's perimeter, along with Warthogs and stockpiles of munitions and supplies. When needed, the LAVs would be deployed and would provide limited armored support along a portion of the perimeter. The plan was only partially sound on paper; there were many complications that would actually sink the plan. Prosperity City was in a position to acquire more than four LAVs - but, as it often went, many ignorant civilians saw little need for armored personnel carriers in a city (some nay-sayers even cited that the government was trying to gain more power to oppress the population) and only four units were kept in the city.

Peyton idly checked his wrist chronometer. Some fifteen minutes had passed.

"Sheesh," Adam grumbled as he lay on the street, "can they take any longer?"

"I don't see you doing anything," the stocky security guard retorted.

"Shut up, I wasn't talkin' to you!"

"Then shut your frikkin' trap!"

"Both of you, knock it off_!" Peyton snapped. "Bloody Elisa! You're like a couple of freshman high school girls or something." The slender, raven-haired girl next to Langdon gave a half-amused chuckle. "What the hell're you laughin' at, Emma?" Adam demanded.

"I said knock it off_!"

"Quiet! All of you!" Caston hissed. "D'you hear that?" The argument abruptly ceased, and everyone strained their hearing - a collection of shadowy figures, almost as still as statues. Amy looked around, curiously. "What's going on?" she whispered? The brown-haired man - kneeling next to Amy's mother - raised a finger to his lips, gesturing for silence; Amy complied as she fearfully glanced around the street, as though expecting something to rush out onto the street.

Which was understandable, Peyton thought as he uneasily shifted his feet. He did hear something. It was barely audible above the distant whine of plasma fire and the staccato of gunfire. After a few minutes, the sound seemed to increase in volume: it was a low thrumming, indicative of an anti-gravity device.

Those were used by Covenant vehicles.

Peyton's eyes widened. "We have to get off the street." he stated as calmly as he could. "Now." The shotgunner hauled Adam to his feet, while Langdon assisted Caston and Emma with moving the injured, red-haired woman. Peyton took Amy's little hand in his own and led her into a dark, abandoned coffee shop. Everyone else hurried inside as quickly as they could manage.

Without a word, everyone took up concealment positions behind the counter, stumbling in the darkness. Just as they'd settled in, the low humming of the anti-gravity device increased in volume. Peyton, who'd hidden at the end of the counter, took a peek and saw a Covenant Spectre loaded down with the ursine/elephantine Brutes.

The Spectre's slim, roughly saucer-shaped hull glinted in the moonlit night, barely concealing its garish, maroon finish. Behind and on either side of the cockpit, two Brutes rode out in the open, clutching handholds and their plasma rifles. The gunner, manning a rapid-fire plasma cannon, had a menacing Brute shot - a massive, belt-fed grenade launcher with a rearward-facing, curved blade making up half the weapon's length - slung across its furred back.

As the brusque PDF trooper turned back to face the others, he could hear the Brutes as the aliens grunted, snarled, and growled to each other in their guttural language. Amy, her mother, and the brown-haired man were together, holding each other and looking frightened out of their minds. Langdon and Emma looked tense, with the former looking particularly twitchy with the MA5K in his hands. The dark-haired shotgunner and Caston looked tense, but they were apparently in control and ready to fight; Peyton found it strange that the shotgun-toting brunet appeared to be so calm - he wasn't entirely unlike Yamada, in that respect...

Are they acquaintances? the PDF trooper found himself wondering.

The sounds of the Spectre and its Brute riders finally disappeared. Peyton risked another peek to confirm what he was hearing. "Are they gone, yet?" Caston whispered. The black PDF trooper saw no sign of the Brutes, and could not see them - for what that was worth. They would have to be quiet and careful.

"I think so," Peyton finally answered. "But we should stay in here and stay low."

"What about Dave and your friend?" the shotgunner asked.

"We'll need a pair of look-outs. One on the roof, if possible, and one on the street to meet Gilliam and Yamada." Peyton pointed to Langdon and the shotgunner, "for now, you two look for an elevated position, then one of you will report back to me. Officer Caston and I will stay here with the wounded and the non-combatants. Just remember: we don't want any attention from the Covies. Keep quiet and stay hidden. Get me?"

Everyone silently nodded in assent.

"Good. Move."

Langdon and the shotgun-toting man headed outside and disappeared from view. Peyton heaved a long, weary sigh and slumped against a cabinet door. He suddenly felt old and extremely tired. His adrenaline rush began to ebb away, now that he was relaxed. Aches and pains made themselves known, since his muscles were fatigued. After a moment, he let out a low groan.

"You okay?" Emma queried.

"Yeah. Tired, is all."

"Wanna take a nap, then?" the girl queried, "we can wake you up in five minutes."

"No thanks," Peyton replied. "I just need to rest my eyes." With that, he closed his eyes...

Caston idly ejected her Glock's magazine and checked it. She'd fired six rounds out of ten in the magazine, so far. All to take down two of those stupid little midgets, she thought bitterly. Upon returning to the station, Caston was ambushed by a pair of the dog-like Grunts. She'd drawn her weapon and fired wildly, expending four rounds, at the first Grunt she aimed at. Her first shot, naturally, had missed, while the others found their mark. She'd then shifted her aim and brought the second Grunt down with two shots to the head.

After that...

Caston shook her head. After that, she'd been constantly on the run. She had no delusions that she stood a chance against the Covenant, alone - all she had were two spare magazines and the half-empty one loaded in her Glock 19. Add in the fact that the 9x19mm cartridge was - compared to other cartridges - relatively ineffective against people, let alone Covenant, and it didn't take a genius for Sarah to figure out that she didn't stand a chance on her own.

Luckily for her, she'd hooked up with the PDF troopers and had been with them, for the past several hours, gathering up any survivors that they could find as they headed for Prosperity Space Port. People had joined the group, and some of them left - while others had been killed, like Velasquez.

The day's events piled up in her mind as she mentally reviewed them. Finally, Sarah began to giggle uncontrollably and felt something wet roll down her face. Her shoulders convulsed as she tried to suppress

it. Emma quirked an eyebrow, "hey. Are you okay? Why're you laughing?" The raven-haired teen crawled over to Caston and looked at the blonde officer with a hint of concern.

In the shadows, Emma could barely discern Caston's tear-slicked face as the older woman alternated between her giggling fit and soft sobs. Amy, her mother, and the brunet watched helplessly, while Adam stared.

"I think she's lost it," the blond teenager opined. In her mind, Sarah silently wondered if he was right. She couldn't stop giggling and she couldn't stop crying. Damn it.

"Fuck off, Adam," Emma replied half-heartedly as Caston covered her face. "Hey. It's all right," she said reassuringly as she rubbed the officer's shoulder. "We'll be fine. We'll make it out of this alive."

For once, Adam kept his mouth shut; in fact, everyone remained silent as Caston hiccuped. Emma continued to rub the woman's shoulders reassuringly. I hope we make it out of this alive, she thought. Unknown to her, Sarah mentally shared that hope.

Suddenly, they all jerked visibly as they heard the not-so-distant crack! of a rifle, followed by plasma fire and a bestial roar that echoed through the abandoned street. Everyone exchanged frightened looks in the dark shadows. Adam voiced the question on everyone's mind:

"What the hell was that?"

To be continued...?

Author's Notes: BWA-HA-HA-HA-HA! A cliff-hanger ending! I'm still not very good with character relationships, interaction, and all that jazz. Blargh, I fail. --' This is going to be my last bit of writing for awhile. Pfffft. As if anyone cares. I'm going to be stuck in California for about a week. Then I'm hopefully going to start a summer job. Which may or may not consume a lot of my time. Then, Fall Semester starts in August, and I'm hoping to keep working while attending school. So...yeah. I'm going to be a busy, busy bee. Blargh.

But hey. It'll be good to have some money. Textbooks are frikkin' expensive. --'

3. Winging it

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Thank you.

Tiger Tank (AKA: RedGuard6)

Working Title: Fox Two

UNSC Colony "Bountiful."

Somewhere in the capitol city "Prosperity."

0141 hours, local time. Late October, 2552 CE

Entering the dark store through the shattered, glass, sliding doors, Jill finally broke the silence; their trip to the sporting goods shop had taken about half an hour, since they'd moved slowly and cautiously through the streets to get to the two-story building.

"Nice find, Dave," she commented, eyeing the aisles and their contents, sweeping the muzzles of her automatics around the store's dark interior. The air inside the store was somewhat stagnant - there wasn't much of a breeze that ran through the store. It was probably air-conditioned at some point, but power throughout the city had been knocked out. After holstering one of one of her pistols, Jill drew and activated her tactical light - it was still dark outside, and the city's power grid was apparently out. Behind her, the trench-coated man set his rifle by the store entrance, and out of sight, before following her further into the store.

"Yes, ma'am," Yamada agreed, quietly. Gilliam turned to face the trench-coated man as he removed his hat, revealing closely-cropped, black hair. Folding up his hat practiced ease, Dave stuffed it into a pocket and drew a large-framed automatic from beneath his coat.

"Can't see a bloody thing," he muttered before donning an LED headlamp and activating it. "So, what do we do now, ma'am?" Gilliam arched her eyebrow, feeling slightly annoyed; she didn't exactly like being addressed - she thought - as if she were an "old" lady.

"You search the place and make sure it's clear. I'm gonna look for

any backdoors we may need to barricade or use for an escape."

"Understood." He turned to leave, but he abruptly stopped and turned back to face her. "Oh, ma'am?"

"_Yeah?_" Jill asked with a hint of palpable irritation. Yamada finally seemed to pick up on it, as he seemed hesitant to voice his question. "Permission to...ah...requisition...anything we may need?" he asked somewhat timidly. Jill waved her hand dismissively, "Go ahead - _I'm_ not gonna stop you." She suddenly scowled at him, "and would you stop calling me '_ma'am'_? I'm not that much older than you, y'know!"

"Yes, ma'am." Gilliam fixed the trench-coated man with an exasperated look, and he adopted an appropriately sheepish expression. "Sorry," he said, "force of habit."

"Remind me to ask you about that, sometime," the Planetary Defense Force trooper replied. "And call me Jill. You got a watch?"

"Yes, ma--er, yes, Jill." The brunette shook her head in amazement - he'd somehow said her name in a way that made it sound like "ma'am." She decided to let that one slide and said, "we'll meet near the entrance in fifteen minutes. Gather what you can - but if this place checks out, we'll be back."

"Yes, Jill." Gilliam held back a sigh as she left him to his errands and headed for the back of the store. What a polite, well-disciplined drone, she thought, dryly. It's a wonder he's not in the Planetary Defense Forces. She shook her head, again, as she strode through the dark store. Now let's see what we have here. After a minute or two, the PDF trooper came across a door with a sign that said: "EMPLOYEES ONLY." Here we go, Jill thought, this must be where they receive their stuff before stocking the shelves. She searched the entire floor and found the rear exit with no incident. Not counting the stupid cat that had scared the living crap out of her, at any rate. Finished, she moved on and began looking for another way out.

There was none.

So, just two ways in or out, Jill concluded. At least the contractors who built this place abided by the safety regulations. There's a lot of concealment and there's a large amount of supplies we could scrounge up. Since there's two stories, we'll have some elevation. I guess it'll have to do, the PDF trooper thought as she made her way back to the front entrance. Her ears suddenly picked up a commotion coming from near the doorway; there weren't any shots fired, but it almost sounded like a fist-fight. Gilliam picked up the pace and trotted toward the source of the noise. Just as quickly as it had cropped up, the scuffling abruptly ceased with a muffled squeal.

The silence inexplicably bothered Jill. She quickened her pace and almost sprinted for the front entrance, trying to remain as quiet as possible. When the front door finally came in sight, she hid behind a shelf and steadied herself while catching her breath.

Leaning around the edge of the aisle, she risked a look...

...Just in time to see a rather messy Dave Yamada push a dead alien over; the four-foot-something alien hit the floor with a dull, sickening **thump**. Jill came out from the shelf she'd hidden behind and approached, keeping the torch trained on him. Yamada's pack was conspicuously missing and his trench-coat was stained with the alien's cyan blood; in his right hand, he carried a large, black knife with a tanto-styled blade and a partially-serrated edge. Kneeling, he carefully wiped the blade clean of the alien's blood with his coat.

"What happened?" the PDF trooper asked. Before answering, the rifleman reached behind his back and sheathed his knife beneath his coat. Still crouching, he looked over his shoulder at Gilliam and flinched as he accidentally looked into Jill's light. "Gah, that's bright!" The brunette lowered her torch, directing the beam toward the floor. "Thanks," Yamada murmured, blinking profusely.

"I found the little bastard sniffing around my rifle," the young man explained as he wiped his brow with his sleeve. As he stood, the young man removed his bloodied trench-coat, and she could see that he wore a black t-shirt, navy-blue cargo pants, and tactical kneepads; she could also see the array of equipment he'd concealed beneath the coat. Jill stared and examined his loadout as he continued in his explanation. "One o' those methane-breathers. I didn't want to make a ruckus." He gingerly sniffed his trench-coat and made a face; the stocky man grumbled, "man, and I liked this old coat, too - now it's ruined."

The PDF trooper had finally sized up his modest arsenal: at his left hip, in a cross-draw holster, rested his handgun. A number of ammo pouches were secured to his belt at his right hip. Also secured to this belt was a black, mesh vest which was apparently designed to be concealed. Various holsters and pouches, and other articles were secured to the vest. Visibly disappointed, he turned around and threw his stained coat into one of the aisles, so that it was out of sight. Gilliam spotted his sheathed knife secured horizontally to his belt at his back, its handle facing his right side. The man spent a moment policing the Grunt's body, and he pocketed a pair of plasma grenades. He then retrieved his backpack and slipped it on, without facing Gilliam. When Yamada turned around, he'd obviously noticed the bewildered expression dominating the brunette's features and quizzically tilted his head to one side. "What is it?" he asked her. "I got something on me?"

"A whole lotta hardware," Jill muttered as the stocky man checked his wrist chronometer. "I've got some questions for you."

"Shoot," he said, returning his attention to her; he undoubtedly had questions of his own.

"Later," Jill said and tilted her head toward the door. "Right now, we have to rendezvous with the others." Yamada frowned and raised his gloved hand. "Question: how we're going to get that wounded woman here?" he asked. The PDF trooper wearily closed her eyes at the blunt query and slapped her forehead. How in the hell did I forget that she silently asked herself. Then again, Gilliam reasoned, fatigue often made people careless. It shouldn't be affecting me this much, though, she thought in defiance.

"Be right back," Yamada said as he slipped back into the aisles. However, unknown to him, Jill hadn't heard him. In fact, she didn't even notice his departure. "I forgot about that. Any ideas, Yamada?" the young woman queried, her eyes still closed. "Yamada?" She opened her eyes and saw that he was gone. The brunette sighed. He just up and disappears without a word, she thought irritably.

After a moment of anxious waiting, the young man suddenly reappeared before Jill and said, "alright, I found a stretcher. We can carry that lady with it." Gilliam cocked an eyebrow at him. "Well, where is it?" the PDF trooper queried, eyeing him critically. She noticed that he'd donned a hooded jacket with a dark, splotchy camouflage pattern. Yamada jerked a thumb backwards to indicate his pack, "In here. It's one of those old, mil-surp field stretchers. It's made of cotton-canvas and can be folded up for storage. Some units in the UNSCDF use 'em, so I hear."

"I didn't even know they had stuff like this," the PDF trooper replied with a hint of interest. "And I've had to patch people up in field exercises, too; I really could have used one or two of these, back then." She gave him an unreadable look, "How come you know about 'em?"

"Well--" Yamada averted his gaze, "I read about these sorts of things."

"Good thing," Jill said and gave him a small smile. Why would he be embarrassed about something like that? she silently pondered. She shelved those thoughts. "But, if that's everything, then we should head out."

"Right, then." The dark-haired man donned his hat and picked up his rifle. They killed their lights - for fear of drawing unwanted attention. Just as the rifleman took several paces away from the storefront, however, they both heard the low thrumming of an approaching Covenant hovercraft.

"Shit!" Gilliam hissed as she ducked back in the store. Peeking around the doorframe, she saw that Yamada had taken cover behind an overturned sedan, kneeling. His rifle was already braced against his shoulder as he peered through the scope. Some two-hundred meters away, she saw a Spectre round a street corner, its thrusters pulsing with a brilliant blue-white light. It was difficult to tell at this distance, but Gilliam thought she could make out the shaggy silhouette of a Brute manning the Spectre's gun turret.

This doesn't look good, the PDF trooper thought. If the Brutes spotted them, she and Yamada would be severely outnumbered and outgunned - nevermind the fact that a Brute could probably tear a human being in half with its bare hands. Their best option, now, was to lay low, avoid detection, and to let the Brutes pass unmolested. Jill started creeping back into the store, to hide in the shadows, when she clearly heard the crisp report of Dave's rifle. Jill's blood abruptly turned ice-cold, and she was overcome by a strange sensation of numbness.

What the fuck is he doing?

The wild-eyed brunette took a peek from the doorway and watched Yamada work the bolt on his rifle. The ejected brass casing hit the

permacrete with a gentle pinging sound - a sound which was soon drowned by a furious, blood-curdling warcry that echoed through the streets. Despite herself, Jill shivered at the bestial sound. She'd seen the Brutes slaughtering fellow PDF troopers and civilians, and she'd seen them fight against the Elites. The ape-like aliens were unbelievably strong, of that she was certain; that vicious cry promised the humans a violent and bloody death.

Seemingly undaunted, Yamada fired again. A fusillade of brilliant plasma bolts began to rake the street outside, causing Gilliam to duck behind cover. The Brutes hadn't quite worked out where the shot had come from, and they blazed indiscriminately at anything and everything in a seemingly lame-brained attempt to flush out their hidden assailant. "Jill!" the young man called out. "I'm going to need to reload, soon!" Another shot rang out.

How many shots did he fire? Gilliam had lost count, and she didn't expect that rifle's internal magazine to hold more than five rounds. Suddenly, she heard him swear out loud. The warbling of the Spectre's drives increased in volume. She realized that the Brutes might have heard his voice. _Shit_...

"Reloading!"

Screwing up her courage and resisting the urge to simply blind-fire from her cover, Jill leaned around the corner and visually sought out her target. The Spectre's gunner was down - Yamada must have nailed the alien with that last shot. She decided to target the Spectre's pilot. There. She brought one of her handguns to bear and fired repeatedly, barely managing to control the muzzle climb. Die, damn it! Sparks flew as bullets hit and ricocheted off the alien alloy that made up the craft's cockpit hatch.

She heard one of the Brutes roar in pain. Did I hit him?

To the young woman's immense relief, the Spectre suddenly veered off to the other side of the street, smashing through the window of a nearby restaurant with a loud crash of shattering glass. The Brute passengers abandoned their seats and snarled at the humans that had dared to oppose them. They ignored the shattered shards of glass they stomped over as they hopped back out through the window and onto the sidewalk. Seeing this, Jill retreated back into the surplus store.

As the Brutes stood fast and fired their crimson plasma rifles, Jill blind-fired her last round and abruptly switched pistols. Just as she did so, Dave's rifle cracked again - he'd finished reloading. Just in time.

By the doorway, Jill leaned out and emptied her pistol at the Brutes. Another rifle shot rang out and a fountain of gore erupted out the back of a Brute's head.

The alien did not fall.

The hell? Gilliam did not ponder for long - she ducked back behind cover and felt, rather than saw, several plasma bolts sizzle through the doorway. She fumbled with her weapons and her spare magazines. As she finished reloading, another shot rang out, which was soon followed by a murderous, frenzied roar.

Peeking from behind cover, one of her pistols at the ready, Jill flinched as the Brute's plasma rifle suddenly flew past her head. She froze, momentarily stunned at the near-miss. The last Brute was livid - its compatriot lay dead, in the street - and the enraged beast beat its muscled chest before dropping down on all fours and galloping toward them.

"_Shitohshitohshit!_" Backing away, Dave slung his rifle over his shoulder, and drew both his sidearm and one of the plasma grenades he'd pocketed earlier. Just as he felt around for and thumbed the grenade's activation stud, the Brute had picked up the sedan he'd been taking cover behind. As the beast undoubtedly prepared to crush Yamada with the automobile, the young man threw the activated grenade so that it stuck to the Brute's face.

Luckily for Yamada, the glowing, blue ball of plasma landed smack-dab between the Brute's beady eyes. Effectively blinded, the alien howled in pain, barely managing to keep its hold on the Terran vehicle over its head. Now, Dave had to get away before the grenade detonated - there was the off-chance that the sedan's fuel cells would blow, too; the young man's face fell as he realized this, two seconds later.

"Jill! Cover!"

Just as he turned to run back into the store, the grenade detonated. The resulting explosion sent him tumbling past the storefront door. Before he knew it, he was hit by secondary explosions; glass shattered and debris flew through the air. Dave felt himself tumble and roll before he blacked out.

Gilliam had heard Dave's warning, but was unable to react - the brunette was knocked onto the floor by the force of the explosions. The stunned PDF trooper rolled onto her back, staring at the ceiling lit by the fire outside; for a few moments, Jill stared up at the dancing light and shadows with a foggy sense of wonder.

As the explosions died down, Jill became aware of several lacerations on her body, courtesy of the broken glass. Removing what shards she could find on her person, the young woman ignored the stinging pain and groggily struggled to her feet. The stench of burning fur and flesh filled her nostrils, and the weary brunette nearly gagged.
Well, that's the last one, Gilliam thought. For now, anyway.

Even her thoughts sounded tired and muddled. However, she did not stop and rest - instead, she ambled out the store door, looking around the street. After a few moments, she spotted Yamada and felt a slight feeling of urgency overcome her fatigue; the young man lay bleeding and spread-eagled on the sidewalk, motionless. Gilliam hurried to his side and rolled him onto his back, setting aside his rifle as she did so.

While checking the young man for signs of breathing, the PDF trooper pressed her fingers into the his neck, searching for a pulse from his carotid arteries. "You'd better not be dead, you frikkin' idiot," Gilliam muttered under her breath. As if in reply, Yamada gave a low groan. Well, there's a life sign, the brunette thought. She heaved a sigh of relief.

"Wakey, wakey," Gilliam said in a rough approximation of a sweet voice. Yamada mumbled incoherently for a moment before asking, "who dat? Who dere?" The dark-haired man groaned again as he tried to sit up, "_frikk_ - th' back o' muh head's _killin'_ meh." He settled for readjusting his glasses. "Relax, kid," she hushed him, gently pushing the spectacled man back down. Jill held up three fingers over Yamada's face for a second, before lowering one. "How many fingers am I holding up?" she asked. He squinted behind his glasses for a second. "Uhhh...one or two?"

"Close enough." Gilliam smiled, "nice work."

"Kinda wish I thought that last part through, better," Yamada slurred.

"D'you think you can move? We should head back and meet up with the others."

"Think so," Dave murmured. Grimacing, he struggled up into a sitting position, supporting himself with his arms, and looked around. "Hey, c'n we 'jack that alien hover-thingy?" With his automatic still in hand, he carelessly pointed at the roughly saucer-shaped Spectre in the wrecked restaurant. "Migh' not need da stretcher after all."

Sounds good, Jill thought. But something nagged at her from the back of her mind - for some reason, she felt drawn toward the Spectre - the need to check on something in the wreckage. "I'll be right back," Gilliam said as she trotted to the restaurant where the Spectre rested. Yamada sat there for a moment before holstering his sidearm, grabbing his rifle, and struggling to his feet, using the rifle to help himself up.

The stocky, dark-haired fellow checked himself and pulled metal fragments out of his flesh, grousing and swearing under his breath. Once he'd finished, he checked his rifle, ensuring that it was still in working order. After reloading the weapon's internal magazine, the young man nodded to himself, satisfied and relieved that the rifle was still functional. The exercise cleared his head - but his head still felt like it was full of cotton. I should see if these Brutes have any more plasma grenades. Just as the young man finished that thought, he heard a series of gunshots and whirled around; he braced the stock of his rifle against his shoulder, training his weapon on the source of the commotion.

Jill exited the restaurant, looking somewhat shaken. Dave lowered his rifle as she approached. "You all right? What happened?"

"The pilot was still alive," Gilliam replied, stopping a few feet away from Yamada. The dark-haired man nodded - he needed no further explanation: it was fairly obvious that the Brute pilot had survived, and that Jill had finished the alien off. Judging by the brunette's expression and her visible state of tension, it was likely that the Brute had somehow surprised her.

He tilted his head and looked her over. You all right, though? he repeated his question. The older woman stared at him for a moment before looking away. "Yeah," she replied, her voice somewhat distant. Without warning, Gilliam collapsed against Yamada - the startled

young man staggered and had to refrain from shoving the brunette away with his rifle.

The straw that broke the camel's back, Dave thought. Well, I really don't blame her... It's been a long day. For a moment, he tensed - he wasn't very big on physical contact. Nevermind that he now held a rather voluptuous young woman in his arms. Well, crap, he thought. Coming to a decision, he looked toward the sporting goods store. I certainly can't leave her here... I knew I should've grabbed some extra web belts while I was in there. Hastily, he dragged the unconscious PDF trooper into the store.

After finding what he sought, Dave left the store - taking great care to duck as he went through the entrance - and headed back to rejoin the group, with Jill on his back and shoulders. With the webbed belts, he'd fashioned a simple rig to carry Jill, leaving his hands free for his weapons. It was a method usually employed to carry wounded in the field, but it still proved effective. However, he would have to be careful to avoid hitting Gilliam's head on something.

That means I may have to avoid cover, Yamada thought grimly. Then there was the inconvenience of ditching his pack in the store so that he could carry Gilliam. Growing somewhat tired and impatient, the dark-haired man quickened his pace, panting with the extra weight and the exertion. In practice, he knew, moving too quickly was often extremely dangerous in an urban environment: by increasing his speed he reduced his field of vision, and he became much less observant of his surroundings. It also made him even more tired.

Fatigue makes one careless, Dave reminded himself. And carelessness can get you killed. He slowed his pace, deciding to err on the side of caution. Before he knew it, however, he'd walked head-long into a solid wall of muscle. Fuck. "'Scuse me, sorry," he apologized automatically. Gilliam was jarred awake and she rubbed her eyes sleepily - Yamada stepped back and looked up at the silhouette of a man he slowly recognized as "Peyton."

"Oh," the younger man said.

"'Bout time you guys showed up," Peyton rumbled. "We thought you were goners."

"Nothing we couldn't handle," Jill said wearily. "Ran into a Spectre full of Brutes on the way back."

"So that was you?" The burly PDF trooper eyed them both.

"Yeah," Jill replied. She fidgeted. "Hey, Dave? I appreciate the lift and all, but would you mind letting me down?"

"Oh. Yes, ma'am," Yamada replied. Peyton looked on in bemusement as Jill huffed irritably and made as if to slap the back of Yamada's head. The younger man promptly sat on the sidewalk and lay down on his back. After doing so, he quickly extricated himself from the carrying rig he'd fashioned out of a pair of web belts. Jill got up and stretched for a second before entering the coffee shop. Giving Yamada a look, Peyton tilted his head toward the shop entrance - the younger man caught the hint and nodded in thanks before following Jill in, the belts draped over his shoulder and across his chest like

a loose-fitting bandoleer.

Marcus Kessler looked up as the PDF troopers and a third figure entered the coffee shop and joined the rest of the survivors on the floor behind the counter. Suddenly, he recognized the third figure as the rifleman who'd fired at him. Nervously, Kessler gently held his wounded girlfriend's hand and squeezed. Smiling up at him, the red-haired woman returned the squeeze. Next to her, the woman's daughter, Amy, slept peacefully next to her, seemingly oblivious to the world and the events around her.

Marcus smiled down at the slumbering child. Amy and her mother, Kathryn, were both very dear to him. He and Kathryn had been dating for a little over a year-and-a-half - and just a few days ago, they'd been discussing marriage. Then all hell broke loose and the Covenant had ostensibly invaded. Kessler was jerked out of his reverie, becoming aware of a low-voiced conversation between the three arrivals.

"So, what'd you find, Jill?" the burly PDF trooper, Peyton, asked. The pretty brunette, Jill, shook her head in an attempt to clear it. "Two-story building, two ways in or out: back and front entrances," she finally replied, rubbing her eyes. "Lots of concealment between the aisles and a lot of goodies we could scrounge. The staircase leading upstairs was in the back, where the store probably receives shipments."

"Sounds all right," Peyton murmured. "The next problem is moving the wounded." He jerked his thumb in Marc's direction in emphasis. The rifleman suddenly looked mortified and he slapped his forehead with his gloved palm. "Aw, fudgebumps," the dark-haired man hissed. Inquisitive eyes turned toward him, Marcus among them. The young man seemed to shrink away, avoiding everyone's collective gaze.

"I f'rgot the stretcher we were gonna use," he murmured as he stared at the floor, nervously rubbing the back of his head. Jill shook her head in exasperation as Peyton cocked an eyebrow. The young man added, "well, I probably wouldn't have forgotten it if I didn't have to ditch my pack."

"And? Why did you?" Peyton queried. Marcus saw the young man's gaze momentarily settle on Jill - the brunette looked somewhat upset and she seemed to take a great amount of interest in the floor.
"Nevermind," Peyton said; apparently, he'd caught on about something.
"But what're we gonna do?"

"I can carry someone, sir," the rifleman immediately volunteered.

"No," the dark-skinned man stated forcibly, inadvertently causing the rifleman to tense. Peyton softened his tone, "I think it'd be best if you weren't heavily laden with the wounded. We'll have one of the civilians do it."

"With respect, sir, I_am_ a civilian."

"Non-combatants, then," Peyton corrected himself.

"Didn't you know, sir?" the stocky rifleman grinned wryly, "there's no such thing as a non-combatant in a war zone."

"Who're you trying to impress?" Jill addressed the younger man with a wan smile. The dark-haired man fixed her with a somewhat blank look, looking genuinely perplexed, and replied, "no one, ma'am. Just trying to be useful." Marcus frowned to himself as he continued to listen in.

"You'd be more 'useful' if you let someone else do it," the brunette replied patiently. The rifleman seemed to consider this for a moment, his eyes shifting around as if he were looking over a document. He frowned and shrugged as he focused on Jill. "If you insist, ma'am," he relented. The woman glared at him. "Sorry. At any rate, I guess we'll have to saddle that guy with the wounded," the young man jerked a thumb to indicate Kessler. As silence fell over the group, Marcus froze, inexplicably feeling like a deer staring into the headlights of an oncoming automobile.

"Hey, buddy."

The brunet shifted his gaze to the burly PDF trooper that had addressed him. The recently returned members of the group stared right back at him, expectantly. Tentatively, the middle-aged man pointed at himself with a puzzled look on his face. "Me?"

"Yeah, you. C'm'ere for a sec."

Hesitant, Kessler looked to his wounded girlfriend, who gave him a reassuring, yet somewhat weak, smile. Reluctantly, Marcus crawled over to the PDF troopers - and the rifleman who'd taken a shot at him, earlier in the morning. "We don't have much time," the big, dark-skinned PDF trooper said. "So here's the deal: we need you to carry your injured lady-friend."

"Kathryn?" Marcus blurted.

"That her name?" the brown-haired woman inquired politely. Caught somewhat off-guard, Kessler merely nodded in reply. "So yeah," the burly PDF trooper spoke again. "Can you do it?"

"I guess so." In reality, Marcus felt unbelievably tired and sore from all the ground-pounding their little group had been doing. But his mouth was apparently leading a life of its own. "I'll try."

"Hate to break it to ya, sir," the rifleman commented quietly, "but it's 'do-or-die.' There is no 'try.'"

"Stop being so morbid and melodramatic," the pretty brunette admonished the younger man. The rifleman shrugged in reply and muttered an apology. However, the younger man's words weren't lost on Kessler - and the older man knew they rang with truth. "I'll do it," Marcus amended his earlier statement.

"Good," Peyton nodded in approval. "Yamada, help him get started, wouldja?"

"Yes, sir," the rifleman - Yamada - replied. He acknowledged Kessler with a nod, "c'mon, sir. Let's get you saddled up."

"Okay." The man paused, "you aren't going to shoot at me again, are

you?"

"That's entirely up to you, sir," the rifleman quietly stated in a disturbingly calm, almost monotonous, voice. Kessler studied Yamada's features, looking for any indication that he was joking - to his dismay, there wasn't even a hint of a smile on the rifleman's grim countenance. The dark-haired man quickly stalked past Marcus, keeping low and behind the counter. Amy began to wake up as the PDF troopers silently got up and exited the shop.

Before Kessler's foggy brain had realized it, Yamada had carefully lifted Kathryn's rear off the ground, slid the belt beneath her derriere, and gently lowered her back down onto the floor. "Lie down by her legs," the dark-haired man grunted, "and stick your arms through the belt as if you were putting on a backpack. C'mon, then."

Marcus hurriedly complied.

"Now up and on your feet." Kessler was a bit slower to comply this time, having some difficulty getting up into a sitting position. Heaving a barely audible sigh of impatience, Yamada set his rifle down and held out his gloved hands. Marcus accepted the assist and was heaved onto his feet with surprising ease - the portly rifleman was a bit stronger than he appeared.

Jill appeared in the doorway and beckoned to them.

"All right, everyone," Yamada spoke, immediately getting the survivors' attention in spite of his softspoken manner. Jill disappeared from the shop entrance as he picked up his rifle and carried it in his left hand. "We're moving house and we wanna get there before the sun rises."

"Why don't we just stay here?" the blond teenager complained. "We've already got good cover." The stocky rifleman turned his head to look at the lad and frowned. "It's not far, so stop whining. Somebody help him up," he pointedly shifted his gaze toward the raven-haired teenager sitting next to the portly security guard. "Oh, all right," the girl acquiesced with a sigh. She reluctantly helped the blond teenager onto his feet and supported him. "Don't get any ideas," she muttered. The boy opened his mouth to give a retort, but was interrupted.

"One more thing: don't fuck around," Yamada warned them, "or I'll shoot you both." The two teenagers exchanged incredulous looks, apparently unable to believe what they were hearing. Marcus looked back, catching on that something was happening, but Kathryn and Amy seemed not to have heard. Caston, on the other hand, looked horrified - her expression slowly changed into one of outrage as Yamada continued to admonish the teenagers in hushed tones. "I'm not kidding around," the rifleman insisted. "If you two compromise us with your incessant squabblin' again, I swear I'll--"

"Hey!" the blonde police officer interjected. "What the fuck is wrong with you? You can't just go around threatening to shoot people if they don't cooperate!" In a blink of an eye, the rifleman wordlessly drew his sidearm and aimed directly at the blonde's head. He was a good two meters away from the officer - well out of striking range, but close enough that he wouldn't miss. Everyone froze, and

Caston alternated between looking furious and frightened out of her mind.

"I beg to differ, ma'am," the rifleman stated. "We don't have time to argue, and I'd rather not waste a bullet on you. Everybody on your feet,_now_."

Moving Amy toward the door, Kessler gave the police officer a pleading look, which she didn't seem to notice. The shotgunner in the group cleared his throat and got to his feet - and the bulky security guard followed suit, loosely holding his recently acquired MA5K carbine. Muttering death threats and curses, the blonde woman slowly got to her feet as everybody else filed out the coffee shop's entrance. Apparently satisfied that the officer would comply, Yamada calmly holstered his weapon and followed the other survivors outside.

Half an hour later found a weary trio entering the derelict sporting goods store. Gilliam waited for the loud-mouthed blond teenager - "Adam" she recalled - to hobble inside, supported by "Emma." The raven-haired girl's friend, the stout security guard, was already inside with Caston, Amy, Kathryn, and Marcus. She realized, again, how stagnant the air seemed to be inside the store. Which would be fine - it would serve to keep them warm, to an extent.

Jill brought up the rear and Peyton met them at the entrance of the store, with both the shotgunner and Yamada conspicuously absent. "You're the last ones, right?" the PDF trooper asked the two teenagers. Both nodded and gave meek, affirmative answers.

"All right." Peyton addressed the rest of the group, "we're all going upstairs. Torrentino's secured the stairs and Yamada's keepin' an eye out on things outside." The black PDF trooper led the way to the back, and they all climbed up the creaky wooden stairs. Just as Peyton crested the staircase, a man's tense voice challenged, "who's there?"

"Easy, Torrentino," said Peyton's basso voice. "It's us."

"Sorry 'bout that," the shotgunner apologized wearily. "Can't be too careful, eh?"

In moments, everybody trudged up the rest of the steps and began resting in different parts of what was essentially the store's attic: there were stacks of metal shelves and racks throughout the otherwise empty space. Jill looked around the messy attic and noticed that Yamada was not present. A rising suspicion filled the brunette's weary mind as her green eyes settled upon what appeared to be a maintenance ladder of some sort that ascended into the ceiling. Gilliam strode over and looked up the ladder, realizing that there was an _open_portal to the roof.

Glancing around, Jill saw that the others were too preoccupied with getting into comfortable sleeping positions - or they were already asleep. The shotgunner had evidently retired - with Peyton taking his place and guarding the stairwell. However, the black man seemed to be lost in his own thoughts, and paid Gilliam no mind. The brunette woman mentally shrugged and began to climb the ladder, going slowly and taking great care to go quietly in an exercise of stealth, so as not to rouse the now-sleeping civilians.

When she finally reached the roof, Jill immediately spotted Yamada sitting on a camp stool, his rifle in hand, his elbows propped up on the parapet, and his back facing her. Next to the young man was an unrolled, military surplus sleeping bag and a camouflage net. It was much cooler on the roof, and somewhat windy - to the PDF trooper's chagrin. Quietly, she strode over to him, almost tip-toeing the entire way. Once she was within earshot, however, the young man spoke, "no need for that, ma'am. I'm awake."

"How did you know I was here?" the PDF trooper asked, understandably perplexed. She'd been quiet enough. As she mulled over this, a cold gust of wind blew insistently at her backside, causing her to shiver involuntarily. Yamada stood and faced her. "The wind gave you away," he said quietly, giving her a tired smile, "I could smell your perfume, and sound can be carried by a good breeze. Excellent effort, though."

Gilliam gaped at the young man in silence - however, this silence was quickly interrupted when the brunette sneezed. Yamada gestured toward the sleeping bag, "here. No offense intended, ma'am, you may need it more than I do." Biting back a retort, Jill slipped off her boots and slipped into the sleeping bag as Yamada looked away, hefting the rifle in his hands. A part of her was somewhat disappointed. So he doesn't like me, eh? I wonder if he's.... Gilliam mentally shook her head in an effort to clear her mind of that thought.

"Thanks," she murmured as Yamada continued to maintain his vigil. Jill shuffled over to the rifleman, bundled up in the sleeping bag. "I'd rather not risk being overheard," she said into the young man's ear, causing him to tense up. Sitting down next to him on the roof, the brunette woman frowned slightly, "I wanted to have a little chat with you."

"With respect, ma'am--sorry, Jill," Dave murmured apologetically, not looking at her, "your time would be better spent grabbin' some shuteye instead of wastin' it on me."

"I already got some sleep," the PDF trooper pointed out with a smirk on her pretty face, "or didja forget?"

"Fifteen minutes?" the rifleman asked, a dubious expression on his face. Gilliam shrugged, "I'll be fine - never heard of a power nap?" The dark-haired man paused for a moment before he replied, "I don't think that would be a sufficient...substitute for actual sleep." The PDF trooper merely grunted in response. They remained silent for a few moments, as Yamada slowly swept the muzzle of his rifle as he looked at the streets below. They could both still hear distant, booming explosions throughout the ruined city, but the sounds of battle seemed to be dying down for the moment. Occasionally, they would hear and see Covenant aircraft streaking through the plasma-lit skies, exchanging fire and pulling mind-blowing maneuvers. Returning her attention to Yamada, Gilliam inexplicably found herself irritated at the apparent disinterest the young rifleman held in her. Undeterred, the pretty brunette asked, "so are you from around here?"

"No, actually," the dark-haired man replied as he idly scratched his back. "I moved to Prosperity from the tropics."

"Sounds nice," Gilliam opined with sincerity. She would have loved to have been able to hit the beach at will, go swimming and lay on the warm sand - Bountiful didn't get a lot of solar radiation, compared to Earth, for some reason or another; heck, some types of cancer were almost unheard of. Especially skin cancer. "But if you lived down there, what made you move up here?" The rifleman did not answer right away, tensing up even more - which Jill wouldn't have thought possible, a few minutes earlier - and heaving a sad or weary sigh; it was difficult for Gilliam to tell. The PDF trooper was worried she might have hit a nerve.

"There were a few...compelling...reasons," Yamada finally replied. "Most of them would probably sound stupid."

"Try me," the brunette insisted. To her chagrin, however, the young rifleman remained tight-lipped and did not elaborate. Gilliam decided to change the subject, "so what's that rifle you're using? It looks pretty unusual for a bolt-action." The PDF trooper was amazed to see the instantaneous shift in Yamada's mood - and she mentally made a note of it in the back of her mind - he brightened and seemed to warm up to Gilliam in the blink of an eye. He immediately shifted the rifle in his hands and held it out for her to see.

"Ceska Zbrojovka five-fifty full-stock, chambered in nine-point-three by sixty-two millimeter cartridge. Rated for takin' down a lot of large and dangerous game - though I'm not sure if it'd be enough to instantly kill a Terran elephant." Dave shrugged slightly and rested the butt of the rifle on the roof, "works well enough against Brutes, apparently."

"Apparently," Jill echoed in agreement. The rifle had indeed proven quite effective in the skirmishes she'd seen the young man fire his weapon. He was, admittedly, something of a poor shot, however. "I never did get into longarms, though. I prefer handguns."

"What do you carry?" the rifleman inquired eagerly. In reply, Gilliam unholstered one of her automatics within the sleeping bag and took the handgun out into the open, causing the sleeping bag to slip down to the brunette's waist. Jill then removed the magazine and cleared the chamber before handing it to Yamada, grip-first. The young man propped his rifle against the parapet and accepted the pistol. He examined it in the near-darkness for a moment and his eyebrows rose slightly.

"A Kimber!" Dave hissed in equal parts awe and envy. "They don't even make these, anymore!" he marveled for a moment before turning his gaze back onto Gilliam. "Your other handgun is a Kimber, too?" Gilliam nodded, somewhat pleased at the young man's enthusiastic response. "Yup," the brunette said proudly, "Custom-Twos."

"Please pardon me for asking, but where'd you get these?" the rifleman queried as he returned the handgun to Gilliam, grip-first. As she reloaded and reholstered the Kimber, the shapely brunette gave a sad smile, "believe it or not, they belonged to my grandfather. They're family heirlooms." Jill bundled up in the sleeping bag, once again. The trooper's enthusiasm dimmed. "Ah." He apologized, a crestfallen expression on his face, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to--"

"It's okay," Gilliam cut him off, "I've gotten over it." The young

woman sighed wistfully. "He's the one that introduced me to shooting - he used to do those gunslinging tricks with the old six-shooters." The rifleman nodded in understanding. "Neat," he opined earnestly. "So he used Colt 'Peacemakers, then?'"

"Ruger Vaqueros, actually," the brunette corrected, and Dave's mouth formed a silent "ah" of comprehension. Jill was somewhat pleased that the young man did not look hopelessly lost like a lot of the trendy wannabe-badasses in the PDF - very few people, these days, appreciated the reliability and simplicity of a good revolver. Yamada nodded in approval, "very nice, from what I've heard. Can't say I've had the pleasure of handling or using any of 'em, though. I've got a subcompact thirty-eight special."

"Oh?"

"It's my back-up," Yamada elaborated, "I usually try to hide it pretty well." Jill mentally recalled the young man's loadout and realized she hadn't spotted the aforementioned revolver when Yamada had removed his coat. Her curiosity piqued, the brunette woman queried, "oh? Then where do you hide it?"

"Uh...you don't wanna know where it is," the man replied as he gave a small wave of his gloved hand. A moment of awkward silence passed, and the two stared into the other's eyes. Gilliam, understandably somewhat perplexed by the unusual gesture, blurted out, "the hell was that?"

"I take it you've never seen Star Wars."

Gilliam stared. "...What?" she asked.

"Nevermind." Yamada scratched the back of his head and gave Jill a sheepish grin - the brunette continued to stare at the spectacled rifleman in bewilderment. They remained silent for several long moments, and in an effort to cover up his embarrassment, the dark-haired man resumed peering over the parapet and scanning the streets below through his scoped rifle. Dave suddenly flinched when he felt something heavy lean against his right thigh. The young man broke away from the scope and turned his gaze upon Gilliam - the young woman had fallen asleep, bundled up in the sleeping bag, and was currently using his thigh as a makeshift pillow.

An amused smile crossed Yamada's lips. What'm I, a bloody pillow? However, he made no move to disturb or wake her. For a moment, he found himself relishing in the position he was in - he enjoyed the contact, the feeling of Gilliam leaning against him. Wearily, the rifleman shook his head in an effort to clear it of the warm, fuzzy thoughts in his head - he needed to stay focused. What the bloody hell am I thinking? No sense in gettin' your hopes up, mate_, he mentally admonished himself, she's way out of your league. With great care, the dark-haired man slowly shifted and lowered Gilliam so she was in a more comfortable sleeping position on the roof. The brunette was apparently so tired, she didn't even wake up - instead, she shifted and mumbled incoherently in her sleep. Moving sluggishly, Dave spread the camouflage net over Gilliam - just in case, he told himself.

Giving the brunette one last glance, Yamada turned his attention back on the streets below.

To be continued...?

Author's Notes: Whew! That was a doozy. And, somehow, it seems kind of lame. Although that could be due, in part, to the _Warhammer 40K: Dawn of War - Dark Crusade_ experiment I have going right now. I've already started working on the next update for Fox Two!, if anybody gives a rat's ass (very few people do, it seems). Next installment might be awhile, due to my having no weekend, whatsoever - on account of my part-time job. Oh well. At least I have some spending money and some funds for those damned expensive textbooks.

At any rate, I'm going to try and make the next update lengthy, like this chapter. Now that things have slowed down a touch, however, it might get boring and even aggravating. We'll see. 83 I'm still trying to work on the character development thing, and they still have a considerable way to go before they reach the spaceport. It's not over yet. T.T

4. Idle Time

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Thank you.

Tiger Tank (AKA: RedGuard6)

Working Title: Fox Two

UNSC Colony "Bountiful."

Somewhere in the capitol city "Prosperity."

1031 hours, local time. Late October, 2552 CE

As Joshua Torrentino clambered up the ladder and onto the roof, his shotgun slung across his back, he could hear and feel the distant thunder of explosions that seemed to be a nearly omnipresent drumbeat in Prosperity. After several hours of well-deserved and restless sleep, and a hearty spot of rations for breakfast, the PDF trooper - Peyton - had sent him up to the roof to relieve Yamada. Frankly, Torrentino was surprised - the rifleman should have been relieved hours ago.

For a brief moment, the dark-haired shotgunner indulged in the feeling of the warm, morning sun and the cool breeze that swept across the roof - it had grown somewhat stagnant and uncomfortable, down below, since there weren't any windows to be opened for ventilation. Unslinging his shotgun as he took in his surroundings, Joshua was surprised to see Yamada still seated on his camp stool and with his rifle in his hands. The shotgunner's gaze then fell upon the slumbering form beneath the camouflage net, next to the seated rifleman; Joshua pushed his thick-lensed glasses back up the bridge of his nose and quirked up an eyebrow. Pushing his thoughts and suspicions aside, Joshua returned his attention to Yamada and quietly cleared his throat.

"Morning."

"Oh," the rifleman replied as he turned to face Torrentino. The round-faced man looked gaunt, with shadows beneath his bloodshot eyes. He looks like how I feel, the shotgunner thought wryly. "You look like shit, man," Joshua commented. "Go get some sleep - I'll take it from here."

Yamada nodded groggily, then stood at the military position of attention - the latter took Torrentino by surprise. "I stand relieved," the rifleman replied with a small smile and unsteadily dragged himself toward the ladder, almost losing his balance once or twice. Yamada slung his rifle across his back and promptly descended down the ladder which Torrentino had just ascended. Joshua shook his head as he sat down on the camp stool and settled in for guard duty. For several moments, the shotgunner idly inspected his weapon, ensuring that everything was in proper, working order - and that he had an ample amount of shotshells. He then braced the stock against his shoulder and peered down the sights, aiming at the dour, cloudy sky. After over half an hour into his watch, Torrentino turned his head when he heard someone giving a great big yawn - Gilliam had tossed back the camouflage net and was sitting up in a sleeping bag, rubbing her eyes blearily. "Oh...where'm I?" she groaned as she luxuriously stretched her arms into the air. The shotgunner tried not to stare at her.

"Morning, sleeping beauty," Torrentino acknowledged the PDF trooper with a nod. The brunette stopped rubbing her eyes and blinked blearily at him for a few moments. "Hey, where'd Yamada go?" she asked, although she already seemed to know the answer - she gazed at

the hole in the roof that led downward.

"I sent him below to get some shuteye, awhile ago," the shotgunner replied. "He really looked like he needed it." Without another word, Gilliam was up and out of the sleeping bag, had hastily put on her boots, and had followed Yamada down the ladder. Torrentino inwardly shrugged and began settling in for what he hoped would be an uneventful and boring watch.

Meanwhile, Gilliam moved away from the ladder and looked around the attic, seeking out Dave. To her disappointment, the rifleman was nowhere to be seen - only the sleeping forms of Kathryn, Amy, and Peyton were visible; Adam sat on the floor, looking like he was fighting off the urge to nod off. For a moment, the PDF trooper puzzled over where the other survivors had gone - they were conspicuously absent. Gilliam quietly made her way over to Kathryn and carefully examined the auburn-haired woman's wounds. The older woman's top had been burned away where a plasma bolt had slammed into her chest. Fortunately, from what Gilliam was able to tell, the bolt had miraculously not killed her - the PDF trooper reasoned that the civilian had probably been hit by an uncharged plasma pistol at long range. However, the red-head's chest was still severely burned and would undoubtedly leave a nasty scar.

Hopefully, Kathryn would be able to at least walk within the next day or two. Slipping on a pair of disposable, latex gloves, Gilliam shook her head and quietly woke Kathryn up to clean and redress the older woman's wounds. It was an unsavory process, but a necessary one to prevent infection and to promote healing. At least it wasn't a sucking chest wound - Jill shivered as she remembered the grisly first-aid procedures for treating someone with such a severe injury.

Once she'd completed her task, somewhat satisfied that the auburn-haired woman would be fine for the time being, Gilliam moved on to Adam. The blond kid grinned lecherously at the brunette as she knelt next to him. "'Mornin','" he greeted the PDF trooper as she checked on his wound and treated it; it looked quite nasty, even though the beam rifle shot had cauterized the wound - the beam had burnt through the flesh of his leg, although he was extremely lucky that it hadn't burnt through bone, nerves, or any large blood vessels. Jill did not return the greeting as she checked the lad out. He seemed to be fine, although it was likely he would have a limp when this was all over. He certainly wouldn't be running any marathons.

Adam continued to smile and stare - but with determined professionalism, Jill ignored his gaze and continued to work in stoic silence. Oh fuck, she suddenly realized, I should have changed gloves. Not doing so meant a high risk of spreading any blood-borne pathogens - which could prove fatal in extreme cases. Unnoticed by the PDF trooper, the teenager had quirked up an eyebrow at her sharp intake of breath. Inwardly cursing herself, Jill finished up with Adam's wound, carefully disposed of her latex gloves, then descended down the staircase, heading for the sales floor. Uneasily and carefully striding out onto the floor, the PDF trooper's callused hand hovered near the grip of her holstered automatic, tensed and ready to draw the handgun in an instant. To Jill's relief, she ran into Marcus - the brunet greeted her with a timid smile.

"Morning."

"Morning," Gilliam replied, relaxing visibly and letting her arm hang casually at her side. Her hand remained well within reach of the grip of her holstered sidearm - which was one of the benefits of a thigh holster. "Is everybody down here?"

"Yeah," the older man nodded. "Peyton told us to scrounge up food and supplies before he went to sleep, so we're grabbing what we can. Did you eat breakfast, yet?"

"Not yet."

"Plenty of rations to go around - that Yamada guy was right to bring us all here. This place is a goldmine!"

"Speaking of 'Mister Funny-Hat,'" Jill interjected, "have you seen him?"

"Saw him a little while ago; probably had to use the lavatory." Kessler shrugged, "but then he went back upstairs - that was the last I'd seen of 'im." The PDF trooper frowned and nodded, "thanks, Marcus."

"Anytime. Go grab some chow, if you're hungry." To her great embarrassment, Gilliam's stomach chose that moment to make itself heard, and the pretty brunette's face fell. "Good idea," she murmured as the brown-haired man gave her a knowing smile. When Kessler pointed the way, the PDF trooper thanked him and went on her way. Along the way, she pilfered a couple of energy bars and scarfed one down for a brief respite from her grumbling stomach. Breakfast was a simple, yet dangerously unhealthy affair: a Meal-Ready-to-Eat, chock-full of the necessary vitamins, minerals, nutrients, all heavily laced with preservatives and copious amounts of sodium.

Caston happened to be nearby when Gilliam found the box of rations - the blonde officer was slowly chowing down on a pouch of what passed for scrambled eggs. "Morning," Jill offered as she picked up a slim, rectangular box that indicated that it contained some sort of chicken "dish." The policewoman did not answer - she continued to eat in sullen silence. Gilliam wondered if she'd done something to offend the gray-eyed blonde.

"Hey. 'Mind if I join you? You look like you could use the company."

"Sure," Caston nodded absentmindedly. "Go ahead." Sitting next to the policewoman, Jill opened the entree and didn't even bother to warm it up. She was that hungry. The two ate in palpable silence for a few moments. Unable to bear it, Gilliam finally decided to break the tense atmosphere. The dark-haired woman lowered her ration pouch and her spoon. "Have you seen Yamada around, this morning?"

"Who?" Caston arched an eyebrow, feigning uncertainty; the blonde's reaction to the innocuous question told the PDF trooper a lot. The brunette decided to rise to the bait and prompted, "you know: Mister 'Funny-Hat.' Have you seen him at all?"

"Nope," the blonde officer stated with a subtle, yet fierce tone of bitterness or resentment.

I wonder what she's got against him, Gilliam thought as she resumed eating. Then the PDF trooper recalled Yamada's rather unpredictable and dangerous actions she'd borne witness to within the past couple of days. As Jill had noticed, Dave wasn't exactly a team player - as had happened the previous day, he would often venture off on his own to flank an enemy position, to avoid an ongoing skirmish, or to find a vantage point for himself. All without consulting with anyone.

Then he'd repeatedly threatened fellow survivors who hesitated or who showed the slightest bit of reticence when he ordered them to move. That'd probably do it. And maybe that's why he didn't join the military nor the militia, Gilliam postulated. Playing on the team just might not be his cup of tea. The brunette pondered on that for a moment. For some reason she couldn't place, she found herself thinking: I wonder if he'd mind having a partner....

"Why do you ask?" Caston's question brought the PDF trooper out of her reverie. Caught off-guard, Jill blinked, "huh?"

"I said, why do you ask?"

"No real reason," Gilliam replied casually in an off-handed manner. "I just don't want him wandering off and getting himself into trouble."

"Why d'you care?"

The PDF trooper arched an eyebrow. "Why not?"

"He's a loose cannon," the blonde police officer hissed, "we'd all be better off if he just went off on his own, or if he died." For some inexplicable reason, that struck a discordant chord in the PDF trooper. Before she realized it, Jill found herself scowling at Caston. "You don't mean that, do you?" the brunette asked.

"Again: why d'you care?" Caston challenged, arching an eyebrow at Gilliam with growing suspicion in her grey eyes.

"So what if I care?" the PDF trooper shot back. "What's it to you?"

"He's dangerous," the blonde officer reasoned, "there's no telling what he might do to you - he tried to shoot that Kessler guy and he threatened to shoot those kids."

"I'm sure had his reasons," Gilliam replied quietly, visibly unsettled. "And I doubt that he meant to hit, let alone kill, Marcus. Besides, it's not like he's actually killed anyone, yet has he?" Caston seemed to ponder this for a moment, then grunted in assent. "I guess you're right," the blonde officer conceded. "But I wish he'd exercise a little more...restraint...when trying to coerce others into following orders."

"Whaddya mean?" the PDF trooper queried, arching an eyebrow.

"He pointed his gun directly at my head," the officer shrugged. "The

scary part was that he had his finger hovering over the trigger." Gilliam chuckled uneasily. "I'll have to talk to him about that," the brunette mused as she continued eating.

"Please do."

"By the way, have you seen him around?" Jill asked after swallowing. After chewing for a moment, Caston swallowed and shook her head. "Sorry. I caught sight of him walking outside, and then he came back in. I think he went back upstairs," the blonde opined, then she cocked her eyebrow quizzically. "Didn't you see him up there?"

"No," Gilliam replied. "I guess I'd better go back up and check..."

"Yeah," Caston agreed, glancing sideways at the brunette. The two of them continued to eat breakfast, amiably chatting with one another between bites. To Gilliam's immense relief, the tension surrounding Caston seemed to have left.

"I can't believe this is happening," Emma mused out loud as she perused the contents of the pegs and the shelves of the aisle she currently stood in. The store was unlit, since power was out across the city, but the sunlight outside provided enough illumination to see by, inside the store. Suzuki was a girl of mixed Asian ethnicities, clad in a trendy, dark, long-sleeved, brand-name shirt and a mini-skirt over dark, form-fitting pants. She wore low-cut, simple-looking, sneakers - which proved to be somewhat sensible footwear compared to high-heels. Behind her, with his appropriated MA5K held casually at his side, Shaun Langdon quirked an inquisitive eyebrow.

"What was that?" the portly, dark-haired man asked. He idly scratched the short, dark, curly hair that crowned his head.

"I said 'I can't believe this is happening.'"

"You can't believe what?"

"All of this!" Suzuki exclaimed as she turned to face him, wildly gesturing around herself. "All this fucking shit! I can't believe this is happening!" she reiterated, shaking her head vehemently in frustration and despair; her short, shoulder-length hair swayed a bit as she did so. Langdon found himself riveted to the spot as he listened to the girl's voice crack. "My parents are dead, we're on the run from aliens who've destroyed the whole damned city, and I've effectively wasted the past year of my life!"

With grim acknowledgement, Shaun nodded. The two of them had been fast friends for several years, already, and both were - at one point or another - college students together. Langdon had ostensibly been fed up with school, however, opting to work a job as a security guard at a local mall. Suzuki, one year Shaun's senior, was still in the process of earning her undergraduate's degree at the local university.

"Relax, Em--"

"How the hell can I relax, Shaun?" Suzuki shrieked, nearing

hysterics. "The university I've paid tuition for is _gone_! For all I know, those student records and shit are all gone! I paid all that fucking money for _nothing_! I probably can't even get the credits transferred!" Turning away, Emma broke down into tears and collapsed onto her knees as she sobbed uncontrollably. It tore even at the jaded young man's heart to hear his friend's anguish. At the same time, he found himself incredulous at what the girl was even _worrying_ about at a time like _this_. _Talk about mixed-up priorities_, he thought. With a grim expression, Langdon placed a deceptively delicate hand on the girl's shoulder and squeezed firmly in an attempt to reassure her.

He wanted to reassure her. He wanted to let her know that everything would be all right. But any verbal forms of reassurance he came up with rang hollow within the confines of his mind. Without warning, Suzuki threw her arms around the stocky security guard's neck and cried into his beefy shoulder. Awkwardly, Shaun patted Emma's back and remained silent.

"We're gonna _die _out here, and nobody's going to know or care!" the dark-haired girl sobbed into Langdon's shoulder. The young man shut his mouth before uttering a bitter comment; he knew this wasn't the time to share his rather pessimistic views - it would have been an extra burden on his friend, and he didn't want to cause her any further grief.

Sheesh.

"Oh my god!" A woman screamed over the whine of plasma fire. The piercing, blood-curdling scream was abruptly cut off with a disturbing gurgle.

What the--? Yamada blinked hard and wildly took in his surroundings with a great deal of confusion as he wrestled with his fear. He remembered this place all too well. _What'm I doing back at the mall? I thought--!_

"_Run for your lives!_" a man cried out, his voice pitched high in terror. Many mall-goers and pedestrians did just that, screaming in hysterics as they scrambled aimlessly through the streets. Purple Banshees screamed in over the city, the unusually-shaped craft unleashing streams of blue-white plasma bolts at each other and pulling all sorts of mind-blowing, high-gee maneuvers that would have made any UN fighter pilot soil his or her flightsuit. Fiery contrails burning in the somewhat cloudy sky marked the descent of Covenant drop pods and landing craft through the planet's atmosphere.

The dark-haired man looked around in shock for a moment, then got ahold of himself - his sympathetic nervous system began kicking in, making his heart beat faster and filling his body with adrenaline. Barely holding back a tide of panic, Dave began patting himself down, taking an inventory in what he had at his disposal - it focused him, somewhat. He was greatly disappointed at the end of his search for a weapon.

Fuck! I've only got my knife!

"_Humans_!" came a familiar squeal. "Kill 'em!"

Yamada whirled around and saw a pack of Grunts charging their

weapons, ready to mow down the civilians running around like so many chickens without heads. Some of the stout little aliens were armed with the bizarre "needlers" - the pink crystals stuck out of the tops of the weapons glowed with a faint, ghostly light. Most of the little bastards, however, were armed with the claw-shaped plasma pistols, the contacts glowing with green energy.

"Well, shit." Yamada turned and fled for cover as he had, earlier that day. Unfortunately, it seemed, he didn't even have his pistol to shoot back with. The one day I decide not to carry concealed! The young man frowned for a split second as plasma fire splashed against the concrete planter he'd taken cover behind. Wait, that doesn't sound right. I always--!

The young man cried out as a stray needler round stuck itself into his shoulder and exploded in a pink cloud of tiny, crystalline shards. He swore and cursed, groaning and gritting his teeth in pain.

Suddenly a hulking, blue-armored Hunter loomed over him, glowering down at him with blue, liquid eyes. The nine-foot alien suddenly seemed to register his presence and gave a muffled grunt of surprise.

Shocked senseless, the desperate young man bellowed defiantly as he drew his combat knife and lunged at the Hunter. With immense strength he didn't know he possessed, he leapt, then slashed and hacked away at the creature's orange throat, which was exposed between the pearlescent, blue armor plating. Orange ichor sprayed from the thing, and the massive behemoth backpedaled, eliciting a horrible, gurgling shriek.

A primal, animalistic rage from within consumed the young man, as he ruthlessly lunged at the Hunter again, this time managing to grab ahold of one of the alien's armored plates. Without a second's hesitation, Yamada savagely slashed and hacked and stabbed at the alien's neck, even going so far as to gouge out its liquid eyes, ignoring the spatters of alien blood and ichor, as well as the renewed bout of gurgling keening that emanated from the Hunter's torn throat.

"Ack! Hunter dead!"

Yamada whirled around, his knife ready, and spotted that same pack of Grunts, their weapons casually hanging at their sides as they stared at the bloodied human in abject horror and shock. Big mistake. With seemingly inhuman speed he charged the short aliens, ready to plunge his knife into his first victim.

"**Die**" he bellowed as he drove his blade down into a Grunt wielding a needler...

Slowly and deliberately, Gilliam quietly ascended the wooden staircase. After getting a chance to utilize the lavatory, and picking up some ammunition for her Kimbers, she decided to head back upstairs to catch a quick catnap. At the top of the staircase, the PDF trooper eyed the attic and its occupants. Peyton sat cleaning his Five-Seven handgun with his cleaning kit open and spread out, and his FN P90 was carefully set off to the side. Adam was asleep, as was Kathryn. Little Amy, however, was sitting next to her slumbering

mother, looking rather restless and worried. Gilliam was slightly impressed - and very surprised - that the girl wasn't crying hysterically over her mother, or raising some other sort of racket. She certainly wouldn't have blamed the kid for doing so. The brunette strode over and knelt next to the little red-haired girl.

"Are you all right, Amy?" The girl looked up at the PDF trooper for a moment. She was the spitting image of her father, but she had freckles on and around the bridge of her nose - and her hair was the color her mother's. The girl remained silent, and had a slightly forlorn expression on her face. "Is mommy going to die?" she finally asked. Gilliam was touched by Amy's concern - so she reached out and hugged the little girl. "No, she's going to be fine, kiddo," the brunette replied. "She'll be just fine." Amy didn't answer - not verbally, anyway. The little redhead hugged Jill back, clinging to the young woman in helpless desperation.

Gilliam smiled and sat on the floor next to Amy, holding onto the girl.

Suddenly, a certain young man issued forth a guttural warcry accompanied by what sounded like scuffling and bootsteps. Heads turned toward the source of the disturbance - Yamada was on his feet, panting, his glasses askew, and his wicked-looking combat knife drawn. Jill controlled her breathing in an attempt to slow down her racing heartbeat and stared at the young rifleman. Whimpering, Amy clung to the PDF trooper even more tightly, burying her face into Gilliam's chest. After a few seconds, the dark-haired rifleman suddenly seemed to realize where he was and lowered the tanto, straightening his glasses as he did so.

Panting, he swept his bespectacled gaze around the attic and caught the eyes of everyone staring right at him.

"Sorry," he muttered, then added something about going downstairs in a subdued, embarrassed murmur. He uneasily sheathed his blade, picked up his pack from behind a stack of metal shelving, and briskly hurried downstairs, the heavy clunking of his boots marking his rapid flight. Silence permeated the air as the other occupants of the attic exchanged bewildered looks, long after he'd gone.

"Fucking nutcase," Adam muttered. Nobody responded to the blond teenager - they were all too busy with their own unvoiced opinions questioning Yamada's mental state. Gilliam continued to hold onto Amy, deliberating for a moment before whispering, "I'll be back, okay?" The little girl nodded timidly. Giving the little redhead a reassuring smile and a quick hug, the PDF trooper got to her feet and noticed that he'd left his CZ 550 rifle. Reluctantly picking up the heavy rifle, Gilliam followed Yamada downstairs, intent on finding him. But what will I do when I catch up with him? she asked herself. The young woman couldn't think of an answer - she figured it'd come to her when she arrived at that point in time. I just hope he doesn't blow my head off, she thought half-jokingly.

The dark-haired man had already entered the sales floor and was wandering through the aisles with great deliberation, silently fuming in embarrassment, ashamed at his delirious outburst. I'm such a weakling, he thought furiously. Nobody else certainly seemed to be having any trouble coping with the stress of the situation. Apart from bickering and the expected complaints about their living

conditions and situation, anyway. Why was he having such a hard time, having nightmares and crying out in his sleep? Fucking pathetic. Better get my shit together and get my head screwed on straight - I don't want to wind up getting the others killed because I'm a sissy little mama's boy. Even if some of the idiots deserve to get blasted for their stupidity.

Yamada shook his head to clear that last thought from his mind. No, that's not fair, he reprimanded himself. That's not right. They have more of a right to live than I probably do. He stifled a yawn. All right. Time to find somewhere to sack it out.

After a few minutes of wandering aimlessly through the aisles, making sure to avoid the front of the store, the exhausted young man finally found what he was looking for. He picked out a rolled-up sleeping mat and unrolled the olive-drab sheet of foam onto the floor. Sighing in relief, Yamada nearly collapsed upon the mat and set his ruck off to the side with a dull clunk, taking great care not to carelessly drop the backpack onto the floor. Much better, he thought as he closed his eyes, not even bothering to remove his glasses. He shifted and rolled onto his back, then waited for the sweet embrace of sleep, once again.

Just as he was at the brink of oblivion, his eyes shot open again. Aw, shoot. I forgot my rifle. Groaning in irritation as he sat up, Dave was about to get up onto his feet when Gilliam appeared at the end of the aisle, holding his rifle. For a brief second, Dave idly wondered if Gilliam was a mind-reader. The young woman spotted him and approached him warily - in turn, Yamada watched her approach as he remained seated on his sleeping mat.

"You forgot something," the PDF trooper chided as she strode over to him. "Yeah," the dark-haired man murmured, clearly embarrassed and ashamed. "Sorry. Thanks." Wordlessly, and without fully realizing it, Yamada scooted away from Gilliam, inadvertently offering her a seat. To the rifleman's mild and pleasant surprise, the brunette sat next to him on the foam mat, handing him his weapon. Dave gratefully accepted his beloved bolt-action rifle with mumbled thanks as the brunette settled next to him.

"This is nice," she commented in an innocuous tone as Yamada carefully, almost lovingly, set his rifle off to the side. "Beats laying on just the ground."

"Yeah," the rifleman agreed quietly. They remained silent - but it wasn't an awkward, uncomfortable silence. Indeed, Yamada managed to relax a hair in Gilliam's presence. The PDF trooper seemed to pick up on this and permitted herself a small smile. However, it faded as a question pressed on the brunette's mind. "So..." Jill asked, "you okay?"

"Huh?"

"Sounded like you had a bad dream, back there," the PDF trooper jerked a thumb to indicate the rear of the store. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Yamada replied noncommittally, staring at the shelf across from them. There were a variety of sleeping bags, sewing/repair kits, and other odds and ends on the pegs and on the shelf. However, he

didn't seem to be perusing any of the items there - he had that distant look in his eyes, as though looking beyond even the walls of the building; the so-called "hundred-meter-stare." _He must be taking this just as hard as the rest of us_, Gilliam thought. She, herself, was staving off the shock of the events that had taken place over the past few days. Curious on Yamada's take on things, Jill asked, "wanna talk about it?"

"Nah. I'm fine," the young man rasped immediately, tensing and looking around the aisle with an air of anxiety. He still seemed unsettled and agitated - if the haunted look in his eyes were any indication. The PDF trooper's dark eyes narrowed. _Is he trying to be macho or does he think I'm stupid?_ Feeling slighted, Gilliam pondered her response for a second.

"You don't look '_fine'_ to me," Jill pointed out.

"Yeah, yeah. I know, I'm an ugly, mangy dog-face," Yamada smiled, although the smile didn't quite reach his deceptively gentle eyes, "thanks for the reminder." Gilliam frowned at his self-deprecation. "Quit dodging - you know what I meant." The young man remained silent, and the PDF trooper wondered if he would clam up. _Worst-case scenario, he flips out and guns me down,_ Gilliam thought. However, to her immense relief, Yamada did neither.

"Yeah, I guess I did have a nightmare," he finally gave in, shrugging uneasily. "Stupid, I know."

"What about?" Gilliam pressed, somewhat emboldened by his admission. To her, it seemed to be a sign of softening, that he was opening up to her. She listened to him with rapt attention as he recounted the events in his dream. "Just a repeat of what happened earlier in the day. 'Cept I didn't have my sidearm with me." In emphasis, he patted the holstered automatic at his side, hidden beneath his open jacket. "I dreamt I wound up killing a Hunter with my _knife_," he snorted. "Nice to dream, eh?"

"You seem like you could do it," Jill replied, jokingly, "you're tall enough." Yamada made a _pfffff_ sound. "_Please._ I'd have to be a _Spartan_ to pull that off. I'd be crushed to a bloody pulp before I could get within knife range. And I'd've been vaporised by the fuel rod cannon before then." They lapsed into silence once more. As Yamada took up his rifle and idly inspected it, Gilliam mentally sifted through conversation topics to break the ice and the silence. She considered her options for a few moments, watching Dave wipe down the exterior of his rifle. _Well, there's always the old standby_...

"By the way," she spoke up, "I never got to see your sidearm. What're you packing?" Yamada halted his inspection of his rifle and stared at her for a few minutes. He then shrugged as he set his rifle off to the side, once more. Visibly perplexed, the dark-haired rifleman reached into the folds of his jacket and drew his sidearm with a gloved hand. It was a large, black handgun. He proffered the loaded weapon to her, grip-first. Gilliam wrinkled her nose as she identified the weapon, holding the automatic in her hand. It felt unnatural - the grip was much too wide for her.

"A _Beretta M-ninety-two_? Are you _serious_?" The PDF trooper paused in her examination of the handgun, then arched a graceful eyebrow as

something occurred to her, "wait a minute. How did you even get your hands on this? Nine-millimeter ammo and weapons are strictly regulated by the government - like other government-issued weapons and ammo."

"Actually, it's a Beretta M-ninety-six," Yamada corrected her. "The ninety-six is chambered in forty Smith and Wesson, which - from my understanding - is easy and legal for non-government individuals to acquire. It has a little more oomph than the nine-millimeter, and has a sharper kick." Dave grinned, "I find that the Colonial Administration's blatant stupidity is a mixed blessing, a lot of times."

"Oh," Gilliam replied, unsure of what else to say. Still holding the Beretta, the PDF trooper found herself asking, "is the forty-cal cartridge any good?"

"To be honest, I'd much rather have an M-nineteen-eleven variant or a Glock twenty-one," Yamada shrugged. "This handgun was a rather costly mistake. I have to admit, the added magazine capacity is nice, but the recoil can be a bit rough - it's less user-friendly than the forty-five ACP, and it lacks the same stopping power."

"Oh," the PDF trooper repeated, nodding. Then she grinned fiendishly, "you want one of mine?" As Gilliam anticipated, the young rifleman perked up; however, his enthusiasm was carefully guarded and difficult to detect. There was a visible, understandable hint of skepticism in Yamada's manner. "You're yanking me," he accused flatly. The brunette merely giggled as the young rifleman wearily made a face and stuck his tongue out.

"You're not nice," Dave said, favoring Jill with a tired, crooked grin. The brunette smiled in return, but it faltered as Yamada suddenly closed his eyes and let his chin sink down into his chest. Her smile returned as the young man began to snore lightly, hunched over slightly. Carefully removing his glasses, Gilliam got up and gently pressed the young man onto the sleeping mat, in a more comfortable sleeping position. Poor guy, she thought as she picked out another sleeping mat and unrolled it next to the slumbering rifleman. He's exhausted.

The PDF trooper sat next to Yamada and observed him while he slept, resisting the urge to ruffle his unruly hair and failing. Occasionally, she noted, his right arm would jerk away from his body. Her gaze shifted to his eyes and blinked. Huh. He's got pretty long eyelashes. Every now and then, Gilliam got up to stretch, but kept a watchful eye on the dark-haired rifleman. Roughly five hours in, she heard him call out in his sleep. "Medic!" he murmured, "'need a medic over here!...Take cover, damn it!" He started to thrash around more violently.

"Dave?" Gilliam whispered, concerned etched into her features. The dark-haired man didn't answer. He continued to roll on the bed roll and lashed out with his right arm at nothing. Yamada continued to grunt and groan in his sleep. Suddenly his eyes fluttered open as he breathed rapidly, his gaze darting frantically around the aisle and the ceiling. The PDF trooper ruffled the rifleman's dark hair and whispered reassurances to him. She noted, with alarm, that he had reached for his knife. She fought down the panic in her voice. "Easy, there. You had a bad dream."

Yamada didn't reply. He did, however, remove his hand from his knife with a sigh. Relieved, Gilliam silently let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "Sorry," Dave murmured, taking her sigh to be one of irritation or indignation. "I didn't mean to fall asleep on you. That was--"

"Nothing to apologize for," Gilliam insisted quietly as she scratched his head. Inwardly, she smiled as she noticed the embarrassed expression of pleasure on his face. "You needed some shuteye." As the dark-haired man moved to sit up, the PDF trooper firmly pressed down on his shoulder. "And you need to rest some more. Doctor's orders." Jill was glad that he hadn't struggled against her - she wasn't sure how long she could have held him down; and she was glad that he didn't react violently, either. Instead, he merely looked up into her face and asked, "you have a degree?"

"Okay, I'm just a field medic with first-aid training and certification," Gilliam admitted, "so sue me. I still say you need to rest."

Yamada grinned cheekily up at the young woman, his brown eyes meeting her own. "Great. So I'm takin' orders from a quack, am I?"

"You say that to me again when I'm trying to treat you for plasma burns," the brunette retorted, a small smile on her face. "If you're a good boy, though, maybe I'll give you a lolly as a reward."

"Forget the sucker - I'd rather have some breakfast." He checked his wrist chrono. "Or, ah, supper," he amended. The PDF trooper handed him an energy supplement bar she'd pilfered while looking through the store. "You can start with this," she said. "I'll be back with some rations." With that, Gilliam got up onto her feet and strode out of the aisle. Dumbfounded and puzzled - yet grateful - the young man tore open the wrapper and hungrily devoured the bar the brunette had given him. It tasted of preservatives and additives and the like, but it momentarily quieted his stomach, and that's all he needed for the moment. Dave then grabbed his flask and took a pull from it, licking his lips and heaving a contented sigh afterward.

The dark-haired rifleman checked his wrist chrono, again. Man, how long as I out? I almost feel human, again. He noticed that the light shining into the store was somewhat dim, and realized that night was probably on the approach. And that'll be the time for us to move. Under the cover of darkness. I should take a look around and scrounge up whatever I can carry. Yamada briefly considered picking up a sleeping bag or a sleeping mat, but decided that the weight and space wouldn't be worth it. He needed to retain his mobility - or he at least needed the ability to ditch some of his non-essential gear, if necessary.

I should pick up something to carry supplies for my "emergency belt", he thought as he idly fiddled with his pack. And I need a different rucksack. Mine is a little too small for my liking. I'll need something sturdy that has a sternum strap. I should also pick up a poncho and a poncho liner to serve as sleeping gear. Some of the newer - and more expensive - ponchos were lined with kevlar, which would provide limited ballistic protection. At least, it might protect against fragments. In addition, the ponchos fitted with

liners would be almost as comfortable and warm as a sleeping bag, and could be worn, allowing him mobility and the ability to shift his arse really quickly, instead of being bundled up like a mummy.

_And if it's camo-patterned, I'll have some concealment. _Yamada scratched his chin idly, not paying attention to the growing stubble. _I should also see if they have any weapons in here, too - we'll probably need to arm and equip some of the others. _The young man heaved a sigh as his thoughts turned toward this matter. _It's gonna be a right pain in the ass to get some of these people to defend themselves. Probably so used to having somebody else do it for them_. Unbidden, a quote edged into the young man's mind:

_ "You are not free whose liberty is won by the rigour of other, more righteous souls. You are merely protected. Your freedom is parasitic, you suck the honourable man dry and offer nothing in return..._"

Something like that, he thought, unable to remember the rest of the quote. _Of course, I'm probably not in any position to criticize. Seeing as I'm a _civilian, myself. Yamada sighed again. _I'm such a bloody hypocrite. All human beings are at some point or another. There's no escaping it. There's no excusing it, either_. Mentally shaking his head, the young man pushed those thoughts away and began to take stock of what he had in his "oh-shit!" ruck. Ever since he'd first gone to college, and he'd been forced to utilize public transportation, he'd learned the importance of painstaking preparations and planning for contingencies; throughout his life, he'd always been told to always "be prepared", but it was only when he had to commute to school, he quickly took the lesson to heart. Another quote, a simple mnemonic he remembered as "the six P's", popped into his head:

"_Proper planning prevents piss-poor performance_."

It was an ancient saying that Yamada's father had passed to him; according to his father, it had been passed down from generation to generation - among other values and traditions and ideas, some of which had been added to the mix. No one really knew where the quote came from, though. Regardless, it was an invaluable piece of advice. It probably wasn't unique, but his life experiences had certainly drilled it into him. _Hmmm...I wonder..._

After perching his glasses just above his forehead, Yamada quietly sifted through the contents of the main compartment of his modestly-sized ruck. Contained within were just three changes of clean fatigues, six pairs of boot socks, a compact knife-sharpening set, and a cotton canvas bag containing a military surplus gas mask, with a couple of spare filters. However, the young man wasn't quite confident that it was fully functional, even if it still had a good facial seal. He looked through the bag for a moment, then his expression brightened as he found what he sought. He exhaled in relief. _Good, I remembered to pack it_.

With great reverence, the dark-haired man removed a large, sheathed knife with a distinct, "crooked" blade. The dark leather sheath had a brass point, which was ostensibly there to prevent the blade's tip from penetrating or piercing the sheath. Carefully, Yamada unsheathed the weapon and admired the carbon-steel blade and the brass inlaid into the spine, holding it up as he did so. Nearly forty centimeters

in length, overall, it was an exotic knife; it was undeniably beautiful, yet menacing; and it was particularly deadly in the hands of a masterful user, capable of decapitating a victim with a single, well-placed stroke. Dave wished he possessed what it took to unlock the full potential of the kukri, but he knew he lacked not only the skill required, but the strength as well.

The young man sighed wistfully as he examined the highly polished, almost mirror-like blade, his deceptively sharp eyes scrutinizing the blade for any signs of rust or other imperfections. Yamada was no master of arms, but he had an uncanny eye for "minor" details that most people would quickly overlook or disregard. Satisfied that the weapon was in pristine order, the dark-haired man sheathed the blade and began searching through the outer compartments of his ruck for his knife-cleaning cloth, for a quick wipe-down.

"I've never seen anything like that before." Yamada looked up just as Gilliam sat down beside him with a few rations in hand. The PDF trooper continued, "can I see it?" With some hesitation, the dark-haired rifleman handed her the sheathed blade. Gilliam set down the rations and handed one to the young man as she accepted the knife. "Have some breakfast," she insisted as she carefully unsheathed the kukri. Dave accepted the ration and promptly took out a small Swiss army knife to open the pouch. He watched the PDF trooper as she examined the blade, feeling an inexplicable feeling of warmth in his gut as she admired the kukri. Upon finishing her inspection, she sheathed the weapon and grinned at him with a hint of mischief.

"Sheesh, Dave, you compensating for something? This thing must be forty centimeters long!"

The rifleman's face remained neutral, causing Gilliam's smile to falter a bit. It was a little hard to tell with someone who always appeared to have a stick up his arse, but Jill could see Dave tense; he averted his gaze, staring into his ration pouch and mumbling something unintelligible under his breath. Uh oh. I hope I didn't piss him off, the brunette thought. I thought he had a sense of humor. The PDF trooper blinked as the rifleman scratched the back of his head and neck. "I'm sorry?" she queried.

"I said, that's not it at all," he repeated a bit slower and in a louder voice, making an audible effort to enunciate. He gave her a somewhat unreadable and inexplicably unnerving smile, "it's a kukri - a very reliable and useful tool. And an effective...defense implement." Jill gave a small smile at the euphemism and nodded as Yamada began eating. "I'll say," the brunette agreed, "it looks pretty wicked."

The young man nodded as he chewed, then swallowed. He said, "in the Terran countries where the kukri originated, there were larger, ceremonial versions designed to decapitate water buffalo and the like in ritual sacrifices." The PDF trooper's smile faltered. How can he talk about something like that while he's eating the brunette wondered, struggling not to make a face. "Oh," she replied. Thankfully, Yamada seemed to pick up on her discomfort and switched tacks, "it's a great knife, though. Very versatile and rugged - great for chopping wood and cutting through foliage, along with handling other daily chores that had to be done back then." He continued eating.

"I believe it," the pretty brunette replied, grateful for the change in subject. "But you don't live out in the boonies, do you? Why do you have one?"

"Various reasons," he replied after swallowing another bite. He shrugged, "mainly for its versatility. Better to have something and not need it, I think. As you can see, though, it's not exactly versatile in terms of fighting style."

The pretty brunette arched an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Yeah. See how the blade's crooked and bent forward like that?" Gilliam nodded. "That's what makes the kukri so effective at chopping stuff. The blade design is excellent for slashing attacks. This particular variant is actually well-suited towards fighting, which is why I procured it. It's lighter and a hair thinner than your usual variety of kukri, but it's still rugged enough for utilitarian purposes. I wouldn't try digging holes with it, though."

As Yamada downed another mouthful of food, Gilliam nodded, "that makes sense."

"The downside is that while the longer blade allows for greater reach, it also increases my minimum range." The dark-haired man explained, "basically, if I don't have enough room to swing, that severely cuts down on the weapon's effectiveness and neutralizes any inherent advantages offered by the design. Plus, if my opponent comes into my minimum range, he'll be able to stab me with a push-dagger or something." Dave smiled and quoted, "learn to shorten your reach! If the enemy comes close enough to negate your striking power, all stratagem is lost: and if all stratagem is lost, then the battle is lost..."

Gilliam arched an eyebrow. "You sure seem to know a lot about this sort of thing. Did you take martial arts?" Caught in the middle of swallowing, Yamada shook his head. "My reflexes are shit," he rasped. "But apart from reflexes, from what I'm aware, one rarely ever picks up anything worth learning in most widely-available martial arts classes. They often neglect to teach students anything practical - like taking on multiple opponents. With a lot of the instructors who are into competitions and crap, they have a tendency to place emphasis on safety. Kind of stupid, I think, since the whole point of fighting someone in self-defense is to kill the sonofabitch that's attacking me." He grinned. "Besides, I'm not exactly a team player. I'm pretty undisciplined and I'm a lazy bastard."

"I noticed," Gilliam teased. The rifleman didn't rise to the bait - he merely shrugged. "I don't profess to be an expert," Dave continued. "Sure, I know a little bit of the theory. Big friggin' whoop."

"Well, you know more than I do," Gilliam said. "I don't even have a knife."

"You should pick something out while we're here, then," he suggested before polishing off the remaining contents of his ration pouch. The dark-haired man wiped his mouth with his sleeve and Gilliam handed him back his knife. "Bloody useful, knives. Especially if your primary weapon isn't an option for some reason or another. But a

knife is primarily a utility tool and a last-resort weapon - always has been." Jill smiled, "maybe you can help me out, then."

"I won't be much help," Yamada replied as he stowed his sheathed kukri back in his bag. He grunted as he got to his feet. "But let's take a look around, anyway. We need to scrounge up some kit for the others. We'll need to utilize every able body if we're going to make it to the spaceport in as few pieces as possible."

"All right." Yamada offered Gilliam a hand up and she accepted. With surprising ease, the young man hauled Jill to her feet. After Dave had donned his pack and slung his rifle over his shoulder, they wandered through the store, browsing and picking up a few odds and ends - including some load-bearing suspenders and additional pouches and supplies for the both of them. Yamada even helped Gilliam pick out a moderately-sized rucksack. The young brunette had never really gone shopping for equipment - she usually just picked up useful military-issued stuff wherever and whenever she could find it. If it was the latest thing and it was created for government issue, she had once reasoned, then it had to be the best kit available. Little had the PDF trooper realized that most standard-issue equipment was often produced by the lowest bidder; she had no idea that there was usually cheaper, yet better-built pieces of kit produced for "civilian" use. Their "shopping" expedition was proving to be quite an enlightening experience. In more ways than one.

William Peyton awoke with a great big yawn, stretching with his arms in the air and his P90 in hand. The dark-skinned PDF trooper rubbed the sleep from his eyes with the back of his gloved hand, before checking his wrist chrono. Man, that was a nice long nap, he thought as he sat up and got to his feet. Peyton shifted his gaze around the attic, seeing that he was alone with the injured red-haired woman and the blond punk. Both were sound asleep. Guess the little kid got bored or tired or somethin', Peyton thought, realizing that the red-head's daughter was missing.

The older man sighed as he stretched some more while on his feet, working out the kinks. He let his P90 hang on his shoulder, from its sling Oh, damn! Once he'd finished, the PDF trooper quietly made his way over to the ladder and clambered up. Time to check on Torentino. When Peyton clambered onto the roof, he looked up and saw the shotgunner give a small wave.

"Yo. Am I being relieved?"

"Yeah. Head downstairs and grab some grub." Peyton grunted as he pulled himself up and stood on the roof, shivering involuntarily as a cold breeze blew past him. Torentino arched an eyebrow as he eyed Peyton's submachinegun. "Does that thing have enough range?"

"Boy, have you ever seen or heard of the P-ninety before?" Peyton queried. When the young man indicated that he didn't, the PDF trooper sighed, "this thing, as you so masterfully called it, has an effective range of two-hundred meters." The dark-haired shotgunner shrugged as he stood up, "okay, okay. I didn't mean to slight your ego. So who should I tap for the next shift?" The burly PDF trooper took Torentino's seat and settled in for a moment, ostensibly pondering before answering.

"Find Yamada again." Joshua arched an eyebrow, "why not have that

lazy-arsed security guard do it? Make him actually use that damned rifle he picked off from that other guy?"

"Because, frankly, I don't think I can trust Rent-A-Cop Steve to do the job right," Peyton growled. "He's short-tempered and he allows himself to be needled by that dumbfuck kid."

"Ah, and you'd trust a couple of know-nothing civilians?" Torrentino queried acidly, slinging his shotgun over his shoulder. The dark-skinned PDF trooper shook his head. "Neither of you strike me as knowing nothing, Torrentino," Peyton replied. "You or Yamada." The burly, older man turned to face the shotgunner. "Actually, do you two know each other?" He noted Torrentino's slight pause in answering. "We're old acquaintances, yes," the younger man admitted.

Peyton nodded and turned his gaze back out upon the city streets. "Go on. And tell Yamada that he's next in line for sentry duty."

"Yes, sir," Torrentino teased as he headed for the ladder and departed. Peyton studied the cityscape sprawled out around him, getting his bearings, plotting a course through the city to reach the spaceport. _It's gonna be a long trip_, Peyton thought. _On foot, at least. If only..._

While they browsed through an aisle full of torches, lanterns, and other illumination devices, Jill clung to Dave's left arm and pressed against him - the contact had caused the young man to tense, and to give her a nervous and startled glance. But he did not try to break away. Gilliam smiled at Yamada's heartbreakingly innocent ineptitude. The irony of it wasn't lost on her, either; but, she reasoned, humans were generally complex creatures chock full of contradictions.

Shyly offering a small smile of his own, the young rifleman spotted something - or, rather, some _things_ - in a sizable glass cabinet and pointed, "ooh. Weapon lights 'n stuff." There was a variety of display pieces placed over corresponding stacks of boxed products. Not only were there tactical torches, but there were many peripherals like holsters, small boxes of CR123A lithium batteries, lanyards, and pressure switches for lights mounted onto widely available accessory rails and the like. However, the cabinet was - of course - locked.

"We must be close to the knives and cutlery," the PDF trooper surmised. "The guns, too, maybe."

"You're probably right." Dave sighed, "damn. I kind of wish I could pilfer a better scope to replace my current one - but I wouldn't be able to zero it in without giving away our position." Without warning, Yamada slammed the butt of his rifle into the glass, shattering the cabinet as Gilliam reached the end of the aisle. Somewhat stunned, Jill turned and watched as the dark-haired rifleman reached in and picked out a few items, including packs of lithium batteries and a pair of lights. Stowing the pilfered goods in his ruck, Yamada favored Jill with an enigmatic grin and carefully avoided the glass as he joined her. "What was that about?" Gilliam asked as he tapped his boots on the floor and checked his soles.

"Just liberating some spares and such," Dave replied as he resecured his ruck. In awkward silence, they moved on and found themselves on

an aisle that was well stocked with knives. To her chagrin, Gilliam noticed that Yamada almost seemed to be drooling as he visually checked the products on the pegs and in some glass cabinets. She inwardly shook her head, thinking, boys with toys.

You wish he looked at you like that, a tiny voice in her mind retorted. Well, that certainly might've explained the brief flush of resentment, Gilliam thought as she blushed slightly. Pointedly clearing her throat, the pretty brunette piped up, "so what'm I looking for, exactly?"

Just about any other guy she'd run into in the past either would have looked startled and changed the subject, or he would've just laughed in her face; the same thing had happened when she'd asked around at firing ranges, when she was trying to figure out what she wanted in a firearm. Once, some jerk had handed her a Smith & Wesson M500 - a powerful, large-caliber hunting revolver - and let her fire it without warning her about the massive recoil combined with the long trigger pull. The long barrel had hit her in the forehead, and the owner - as well as his asshole buddies - had laughed at her, ridiculing the then-aspiring PDF trooper.

Dave, however, seemed to be seriously considering her question - much like her beloved, departed grandfather would have done. Watching the young man hold his chin as he pondered her query, Jill felt her heart swell and she leaned her head against his shoulder - it felt strangely comfortable. The brunette leaned against the young man - and he wordlessly braced himself to support her. After a few moments of silence, the dark-haired man finally said, "well, that depends on your tastes, really. As a fellow firearms enthusiast, I'm sure you know what I mean."

She did. "The feel, and what I want to use it for."

"Pretty much." He began to more thoroughly peruse the contents of the pegs and the glass cabinets. "Personally, I carry several knives - believe it or not. I carry a Swiss army knife for utilitarian purposes - although I would never use it as a weapon, no matter the circumstances."

"Oh?"

"The blade doesn't lock back. If I tried to kill someone or something with it, I'd probably lose my fingers in the process. If I had to pick a utility knife to use as a weapon, I'd use this baby." He rummaged through one of the pouches on his belt and held up a small, black pocket knife with a shiny, stainless steel blade. "Of course, I wouldn't even think of using this as a weapon."

"I think I get the picture," the brunette replied, somewhat wide-eyed. The rifleman put away the sizable pocket-knife as she asked, "so what's a good all-around knife? For fighting and utility?"

"Oh, that's easy," Yamada replied. "You'll want a Ka-bar."

"I think I've heard of those..."

"Yeah, they've been around for centuries. For bloody good reason, too." Yamada patted the sheathed knife at his back. "Mine's a

combo-edged tanto-styled knife. Twenty-centimeter blade." Gilliam stared. "Combo-edge?" she asked. Dave indicated a knife hanging on the pegs, "yeah. They've got partially-serrated edges. See? Straight edge and there's the serrated section."

"Oh." Gilliam reluctantly released Yamada's arm and removed the knife from the peg. She held the packaged Ka-bar. The blade length, according to the descriptions on the package, was around eighteen centimeters. The blade seemed to be painted black, and its handle seemed to be covered with rubber or plastic, as opposed to being wrapped with leather. The cutting edge, however, was shining, silvery steel. "What style of blade is this?"

"That's the traditional bowie-style," the dark-haired man replied. "The design is popular for its versatility. The original bowie knives were used for all sorts of tasks, including digging small and shallow holes - I'm not entirely sure if you can dig with a Ka-bar, though. But you can cut things, dress game, and you could definitely kill someone with it. As long as you treat it right and try not to use it to pry things, it'll hold up for a good, long time." Yamada seemed to bite his lip, as though he were on the verge of saying something else. The PDF trooper took notice.

"What is it?" Jill queried.

"Nothing. I'm just trying not to get ahead of myself," Dave shook his head. "Once we pick out a blade for you, we'll cover maintenance - and we'll probably touch on, ah, metallurgy a bit." Nodding, Jill returned her attention to the plethora of blades on the pegs. "You said your blade was a tanto? What's that?" In reply, the rifleman picked out another knife on the pegs and held it out for her to see. "It's just a different style of blade. Differently shaped and designed blades have different advantages, disadvantages, and purposes."

"What's the tanto good for?" Gilliam asked, examining the angular tanto within the plastic shell packaging.

"From my, ah...understanding...tantos are good for thrusting and slashing. Pretty good penetration, so I hear. Their actual utilitarian use is somewhat limited - although its use as a weapon is equally limited due to its short length, anyway. Still...I like it." Yamada shrugged, "I've also heard that the tanto is pretty decent at chopping wood - for a knife, anyway - but I'd much rather use a kukri or a hatchet for such a chore. Here, let's open 'em up so you can get a feel for 'em." The young man drew his own tanto and opened the packaged knives, cutting through the plastic packaging. After sheathing his blade, Yamada sheathed the newly-unpackaged knife in its included sheath and handed it to the PDF trooper. The brunette accepted the knife and drew it, looking uncertain as to what she was to do with it. As she examined and hefted the tanto in her hands, Yamada patiently held out the sheathed "bowie."

Jill eyed the knives as she sheathed the tanto in her hands. "I really don't know which one to go with," she said. "I'm not sure what would fit my style." Yamada shrugged. "Might as well take 'em both," the dark-haired rifleman suggested. "It's always good to keep a backup handy, no?" Gilliam pondered for a moment before nodding and unshouldering her small backpack. "Fair enough." With that, she placed both of the sheathed blades into her ruck and smiled at

Dave.

"You guys gonna pay for those?"

Jill and Dave turned to see Torrentino smiling at them, an open ration pouch in hand, and his shotgun slung across his back with the laminated wood stock visible over his right shoulder. Dave gave a small smile and nodded to Joshua in greeting. "Finally got to grab some chow, eh? Who's up top, now?"

"The friend of your ladyfriend, here," Torrentino replied. "Peyton, I think that was his name. By the way, you're on the next watch."

"It'll be nightfall by then," the rifleman said, shooting the shotgunner a quizzical look. "We should be vacating the premises when it's dark." Joshua shrugged, "we'll see. Personally, I think it's best if we packed it in and got out of here A-SAP, nightfall or no."

"We'll be exposed during the daytime - it'd be too risky." As if to emphasize his point, the sounds of distant battle crescendoed, slightly: low, thunderous explosions accompanied by the faint, high-pitched whine of plasma fire. A fight was drawing closer to their position.

"That doesn't sound good," Josh commented. "We may have to move out sooner, rather'n later. We should gather everybody upstairs, so we don't bring any undue attention to ourselves." Yamada grunted, "the only problem with that is that we'll be sitting ducks. We'll have all our eggs in one basket."

"We'll be weaker if we disperse," Josh replied, "we don't have sufficient numbers to split up. No offense, but I don't think your rifle is suited for single-handedly taking down a Brute or an Elite in close-quarters combat. Let alone multiple targets."

"We don't have sufficient numbers to defend these people!" Dave bit out. Jill caught the rifleman's mounting frustration and decided to head it off - she didn't want to find out how much it took to get the rifleman angry. And she couldn't bear to imagine Yamada being angry. "Gentlemen!" the PDF trooper cut in. "I think we can all agree that we need more information on the situation before we start calling shots." Torrentino nodded in approval, while Yamada grunted in assent and shrugged. "Sounds good to me," the shotgunner opined. "But first, we should get everybody together. Make sure we're all on the same page."

"Yeah," Yamada replied reluctantly, holding his tongue. At the moment, he figured, immediate action was required - then they could debate over their course of action. That way, we can get everyone's input. Even if some people don't deserve to be represented. Dave grunted and shook his head to clear it of his unnecessary thoughts - Torrentino was already moving toward the back, and Gilliam was waiting. Their eyes met and the PDF trooper nodded. They briskly swept through the aisles of the store, picking out things while informing anyone they came across to head upstairs.

As the two of them went about their business, Gilliam pondered on the group's options. If they stayed in the building another night, they

risked discovery. But even if they moved out, who knew where they might find another place to sack it out during the day? Then there was the matter of the slowly encroaching skirmish or battle. _One thing's for sure,_ Jill thought, _we'll have to make a decision very soon_.

To be continued...

Author's Notes:

I used/referenced a few quotes that weren't really mine, obviously.

"You are not free whose liberty is won by the rigour of other, more righteous souls. You are merely protected. Your freedom is parasitic, you suck the honourable man dry and offer nothing in return. You who have enjoyed freedom, who have done nothing to earn it, your time has come. This time you will stand alone and fight for yourselves. Now you will pay for your freedom in the currency of honest toil and human blood." Inquisitor Czevak Address to the Council of Ryanti (40k2 Codex Imperialis p37)

"Learn to shorten your reach! If your foe can come close enough to negate your striking power, all stratagem is lost: and when all stratagem is lost, the battle is lost." Shas'O Vior'la Shovah Kais Mont'yr (AKA: Commander Farsight) 757.M41

Thanks, Wikiquote. 83 Those were both from the Warhammer 40,000 universe, by the way. And I do not own, nor am I affiliated with, Games Workshop.

"Proper planning prevents piss-poor performance" is kind of taken from Karen Traviss's Star Wars: Republic Commando - Hard Contact. Although the actual quote is more along the lines of:

"The six P's: proper planning prevents pi--_inadequate_ performance."

Karen Traviss is a bloody genius. XP Again: not associated or affiliated with Traviss, nor LucasArts, and so on and so forth.

I'm thinking about abandoning this project - after playing _Halo 3_, watching the cinematics, and researching on Halopedia...new possibilities have opened up. And I kind of want to work on these newer, fresher ideas. This one-shot is kind of stale - and is based upon out-of-date and inaccurate information. Which are things I personally don't particularly care for.

End
file.